

MIKE SHAYNE

MYSTERY MAGAZINE



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GRAVEN IMAGE

by Brett Halliday

Politics and religion made strange bedfellows, particularly when the persons involved played in such a deadly fashion. The stakes were high, and murder was one way to get rid of obstacles — even if one of the obstacles was a big, red-headed Miami shamus named Shayne! 4

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Shayne sprinted across the yard, put one foot on a concrete bench, and launched himself toward the top of the wall. A bullet thudded into the stucco beside him. He didn't like hurtling walls or being shot at, but one thing bothered him more than those — what he had seen in the house he'd visited!

Graven Image

by BRETT HALLIDAY

THE FULL MOON GLEAMING SO BRIGHTLY OVER PALM BEACH seemed the other end of a tunnel leading straight to heaven. It was almost midnight and the streets, save for the steady gulf breeze through the palm fronds, were quiet as they had been for the last three hours since the town had curled up and gone to sleep.

Just behind the west end of Worth Avenue loomed Eden, as the island had been renamed by the new owners of the estate now called Bethel. Tall, white walls that matched the huge hacienda-style home with architectural perfection separated the grounds from the island's north end. For the four other homes the wall was redundant — who would have anything to do with a family without an old name or at least old money?

As palm shadows flitted across the white walls in a dark mating dance, one shadow moved out of rhythm. Like a bird landing it seemed to appear, then like a wolf it lept up to the top of the wall, pausing there only to step over the electrified wire that, painted black, was scarcely visible.

Covering a full acre, Bethel lay peacefully, its white stucco glimmering as though impregnated with starlight. A Christmas wreath of palm and St. Augustine grass ringed the two buildings in the complex. The Spanish-styled home had been built by a Flagler and passed down through the descendants until the money, like the family, had petered out. When the current owners purchased it, they had returned the house to its original splendor, refacing its sides with facsimiles of the original wide windows and French doors.

Across a brick-inlaid courtyard dominated by a marble fountain of a huge fish spouting water stood a building one-tenth the size of the main house. Originally it had been servants' quarters whose crowded rooms rang with a mixture of black English and broken Spanish. As the family fell into disrepair, so too had the smaller house. The present owners had found it a white-elephant graveyard containing the family's history and skeletons.

The building had been transformed into Bethel's private chapel. Facing east and over the oak double doors sparkled a stained glass rosa depicting two herald angels in flight. The little sanctuary was narrow and lined with rubbed oak pews. At the front stretched a long communion table before an elevated altar.

A figure knelt within. For almost three hours he had remained motionless, his ocean-blue eyes lifted. The object of his fixation was a tall, chrome cross backed by a gold sun.

He had waited on his knees, waited for a sign, an answer to his supplications.

Periodically the barely audible words escaped his parched lips, "How long? How long till He comes?"

The kneeling figure's eyes directed upward, he did not notice the chapel's double-doors cracking open. A shadow slithered through and glided slowly and silently down the plush gold carpet.

Still the figure before the altar prayed.

Reaching the end of the aisle, the shadow reared itself. Unzipping his dark jumpsuit noiselessly, his hand emerged with a darkened .38 complete with silencer. With the gun trained on the back of the supplicant's head, the intruder crept forward.

About four feet from his target, he stiffened, took a deep breath, and let it hiss between his clenched teeth.

At that moment the door the shadow had left half-closed caught a sudden gulf gust. Like twin gavels announcing a verdict about to be passed, the heavy doors banged into the oak pews.

The praying figure snapped out of his reverie.

The intruder's eyes swiveled sideways, his concentration broken.

Fear flooding the supplicant's eyes, he tried to rise, but his cramped legs wouldn't support him. Arms sprawling outward, he fell backward into the white-cloth-covered communion table.

The intruder turned back to the helpless figure, satisfied the momentary distraction was only the wind. He raised the steel weapon.

His eyes widening, the prostrate figure looked up, and then still further up. "Is this the sign?"

The killer smiled through yellowed teeth. "I sure hope somebody was listening when you said your prayers."

He pulled back the hammer.

"No," screamed the fallen man looking beyond the messenger of death.

Out of the darkness a white-robed figure appeared behind the assassin. The figure's hands were interlocked as if to pray, but between them protruded a long, silver blade.

The intended target watched in horror as the avenging angel attacked. Moving swiftly down the aisle, the knife-wielder seemed a mechanical figure on some huge cuckoo clock gone berserk. But, instead of chiming the hour, the angel repeatedly and mercilessly struck.

The blade moved up and down, each blow opening a new fountain of scarlet.

The sacrifice complete, the angel stood poised over the fallen figure in black.

"Why here? Why now?" screamed the still-sprawled supplicant.

FRANK MORELOCK RECHECKED THE SETTINGS ON HIS trusty Canon 55mm f/1.2 and snapped a few more photos for good measure. Even without the full moon, the chapel had just enough light for his high-speed film to work.

The angle and distance were perfect, he thought, wiping his huge nose with a handkerchief. If only the celebrities he hunted down were so cooperative. Yeah, but those scandal sheets didn't pay half as well as his employer would for these pics.

He put the camera like a newborn infant down into his leather case and started across the grass quickly. Once out of there the film wouldn't take too long to develop and the big bucks were his. Not bad for a night's work.

Just as he reached the stucco wall, Morelock, stopping to blow his nose again, felt an impulse to look back. The moonlight reflecting off the rosa caught him squarely like a searchlight.

"Hey, you guys," he called in mock solemnity to the herald angels on the stained glass, "hold up on those horns till I get a chance to spend my bread."

II

POLITICS, SHAYNE REMEMBERED READING IN TIM ROURKE'S column, was the last refuge of the scoundrel. That about said it all. It didn't matter to the big redhead whether they were obviously crooked like the Boston mayor who still tried to run his city from a federal penitentiary or The Honorable Squeaky Clean like Senator Thomas Lott whom he was meeting. The big detective was a firm believer in the corruption of power.

He checked himself in the elevator mirror. Blue sports coat, gray slacks, and even a club tie. The latter had been Lucy's touch.

"If you're calling on a million dollars, Michael," his beautiful secretary had said, "at least look like you've been invited."

"I am," he had countered. "They called me."

"That's not what I meant," the brunette had said, simultaneously kissing him and pulling his tie up tightly around his neck.

The Otis let him out into the penthouse of the Buccaneer Hotel. Immediately two men in blue suits stepped toward him. One of them passed a metal rod that sounded like an electric razor over his body. When it reached his belt — and his Colt Army Special .38, a buzzer went off. Immediately the two blue-suits grabbed him.

Had they asked or even been polite, Shayne would have submitted to a hand pat-down. But they hadn't been.

The redhead took the first one out with the flat of his hand to the larynx. The blow wasn't hard enough to break the windpipe — just strong enough to make him gasp.

The second one was reaching around the redhead's neck as Shayne grabbed his arm, dropped suddenly to one knee, and yanked. The blue-suit tumbled through the air like a circus acrobat, but in the absence of a catcher came to rest in a potted schefflera.

"You'll have to excuse William and Ernest, Mr. Shayne," said a man in horn-rim glasses. "They just got back from a school for bodyguards in California, and I don't think they've acclimated themselves to the real world."

The man in a canary-yellow coat reached out and dusted the rangy

redhead off, even straightening his tie. "I'm Osborne Lockwood, the senator's press secretary. Would you please come this way. We've been expecting you."

"I noticed," said Shayne, watching as his two receptionists tried to put themselves back together again.

"How do you like the artwork?" inquired the press secretary, obviously trying to change the subject.

Glancing around, the redhead felt he had returned to the thrilling days of the Old West. The walls of the high-ceilinged foyer were covered with artifacts — skins, Indian bows, and a matched set of pearl-handled .45s — and paintings of bucking broncos, medicine men, trail riders, and longhorns. Cacti sat in every corner. About the only thing missing, decided Shayne, was a buzzard overhead.

"There's an original Remington over there. Can you guess which it is?"

Shayne's knowledge of Remingtons ended with the rifle, and so not spotting a real one, he gestured toward a small bronze of a grizzled mountain man pointing his carbine at a buffalo.

"Amazing," said Lockwood. "I wouldn't have guessed a man in your profession would have such a keen eye for art."

Having caught a glimpse of Senator Lott on the outside terrace, the big detective studied his potential employer. Tall, robust, ruddy-complexioned, and silver-haired, he stood the center of attention as the cameras circled him. Shayne decided he had been wrong — the birds of prey were here.

"Hold it, hold it, people," shouted Lockwood, running outside. "The light is better if you shoot him against the skyline, not the penthouse."

So's the picture, thought Shayne as he fired up a Camel. The press secretary was choreographing the shoot like a director. The only thing that seemed missing was the ten-gallon hat that had become the trademark of the "Capitol Hill Cowboy" as his constituents knew him. For the last six years, whether you had seen him on the tube or in the papers, you were made to feel like you could sleep soundly because Marshall Lott was keeping the streets safe for the decent folk of Florida.

When the press secretary returned to his side, Shayne said, "Nice touch. That shot against the skyline will make him appear to be Miami's guardian, not some king in his ivory tower. Didn't you forget the sheriff's hat?"

Lockwood took him by the arm. "A new election calls for a new image. We're downplaying the cowboy angle."

"Thomas Lott," said the redhead, dropping his voice to mimic TV announcers, "on top of it all. A man for the entire country."

"You got the picture," said Lockwood, leading him into a private, booklined study. "Would you mind waiting in here?"

"Not if you tell me why the Senator wanted to see me."

"He will tell you that himself, and he'll be just a few more minutes.

AN HOUR LATER SHAYNE HAD FINISHED LOTT'S OFFICIAL campaign bio, the morning *Daily News*, and *Sports Illustrated*'s annual swimsuit issue. The latter had been the most interesting. The biography was nothing more than a puff piece chronicling the senator's rise from the son of a modest Montana rancher to the scion of a huge Florida cattle empire. Obviously with the Sunshine State being the nation's second-largest producer of beef, Lott had no trouble filling the campaign coffers.

The detective's thoughts were interrupted by Lockwood's opening the study door. "Mr. Shayne, the senator will see you now."

The warm air greeted Shayne as he stepped onto the terrace, where Lott stood sipping a tall orange juice.

"May I offer you a drink this fine morning, Mr. Shayne?" said the tall politician flashing a page-one smile.

"Senator Lott," said the redhead, "you're a busy man and so am I. We've been on your time now for over an hour."

"Let me apologize for the wait, but we had to get that television spot right for a kick-off this Friday. And as you can tell, Lockwood with all his advertising background is very image-conscious." The senator sat down on the terrace wall. "Sometimes I feel like a box of detergent being sold to the public. You know, the *new* and *improved* Senator Lott."

Shayne laughed. "Advertising's a little out of my line."

"But finding people is not. Give him the picture, Ozzie."

Lockwood handed Shayne a glossy snapshot. The redhead glanced down at the face of a pretty blonde who looked like a college cheerleader.

"That's Mary Elizabeth," said the senator.

"The Lotts' daughter," said the press secretary.

"You want me to find her?" asked Shayne.

"Actually I just want to know where she is, her state of health, and

her plans."

"A runaway?" said the detective.

"No, Mary Elizabeth turned twenty-one six months ago," Senator Lott said.

"Just call it a case of a young woman asserting her independence," said Lockwood.

"Do you have any reason to believe she's in trouble of any sort?" Shayne said.

"Well," replied the senator, "I think . . ."

"What Senator Lott means," interrupted Lockwood, "is that he and Mrs. Lott have a difference of opinion on Mary Elizabeth's leaving. The senator thinks that a girl her age should decide for herself, but his wife, well, she's a typical overprotective mother, you know."

A sudden shrill buzzing came from Lockwood's wrist. "Tom, you've got to be at Channel 20 in less than half an hour for the Rhodes talk show," said the aide. He handed the senator a manila folder. "Read this on the limo ride over and this time stick to the script with your ad libs. I'll finish here with Mr. Shayne."

The senator rose and shook Shayne's hand. "If you're the detective the papers say you are, I know I'm in good hands."

"I try not to believe everything I read. After awhile," said the redhead, "it gets hard to separate the man from the image."

As the senator departed, Lockwood said, "I'll have your retainer in the afternoon mail. I'm sure I don't have to tell you the importance of discretion in this matter. You can imagine what the senator's opponents could do with the least hint of a family rift."

Shayne nodded.

"Just between you and me," Lockwood confided as he led the redhead back toward the elevator, "Tom needs a strong Rachel beside him in this campaign. And the lady's not going to be worth a damn until she finds out about her daughter."

"Maybe I could talk with Mrs. Lott," suggested Shayne.

"I'm afraid that won't be possible right now. She's busy with some friends. Perhaps later," said Lockwood.

"If I can't talk with Mrs. Lott, can you give me some kind of lead?" said the detective.

"Mary Elizabeth was in her senior year at Florida American College," said the press secretary. "She had a boyfriend neither parent approved of, a doper named Adams, Rick Adams, I think."

"Thanks," said Shayne, stepping on the elevator. "By the way, why

haven't you called the police about this?"

"As far as we know, nothing's really wrong," said Lott's aide. "It's simply a matter of a concerned parent wanting to know about a child. Very admirable in this day and age, wouldn't you say?"

Shayne's loafers clopped onto the concrete floor of the Buccaneer's underground parking garage. For all Lott's seeming sincerity, the big detective had the feeling that just as with the media, he was being allowed to see only part of the overall picture. Things were being edited. Why?

As he opened the door to the Buick, another question stared Shayne in the face. Who was the beautiful raven-haired woman sitting in the passenger's seat?

III

STARING AT HIM THROUGH GLASSY EYES, THE IVORY-skinned stranger said, "So you're the famous Miami dick."

"And you're . . . ?"

"A lush," she aspirated. "You're not as good a detective as I thought. I'm Rachel," she slurred, "excuse me — Senator Lott's wife." Suddenly she leaned over and kissed him sloppily on the mouth.

Gently Shayne placed her back in the seat. "Whoa, lady. They told me upstairs you were with friends."

"Old friends, for sure. Maybe you know Jack, Jim, and Johnny."

The redhead looked at her strangely.

"Why Jack Daniels, Jim Beam, and Johnny Walker." Her titter was 98 proof.

Shayne felt like lighting up a Camel, but was afraid to blow up the Buick. "Can I help you back to the penthouse?" he offered.

"Now that my husband has left for another of those all-important interviews, I guess it's safe to go back. Whoops, I forgot about the omnipresent Ozzie. If he tells me one more time what's good for my image, I think I'll explode." She stared into the rear-vision mirror like a child who had just lost her pet puppy. "What about me, Rachel Lott?" she asked of the mirror. "Don't I count as something other than a Congressional appendage?"

"Maybe I can buy you a cup of coffee?"

"How gallant, sir."

He walked around and opened her door. As she threw her legs out, her chiffon dress slid up to her thighs. Shayne couldn't help but notice.

"I was wrong again. When a lady is . . . indisposed, a true gentleman averts his eyes."

Shayne had never been a student of etiquette, especially the 1910 version, so he said, "Perhaps I can buy you lunch in the hotel coffee shop."

"Why, sir," she said, taking his hand. "Me, a married woman? What will the neighbors say?"

"Frankly, my dear," said the redhead, leading her to the elevator, "I don't give a damn."

BY THE TIME THE WAITRESS FINALLY BROUGHT RACHEL LOTT some coffee and a roast beef sandwich, Shayne felt like he had spent a year on the Georgetown cocktail circuit. She had told him who was doing what to whom, what bills were likely to pass, and why the EPA was in deep trouble.

The black coffee and straight talk were starting to clear her eyes to their natural, deep opal color. For the last hour every man who had passed their booth had stolen a glance, some not so discreet, at the exquisite Rachel Lott. The redhead had no trouble figuring how she had come upon so much inside information. She was the kind of woman men would pour their hearts out to, but now the roles were reversed.

"I guess I'm just a disappointment," she was saying, "to Tom, certainly Lockwood, myself, and especially . . . well, everybody."

Shayne had a good idea who had been left out, and since Rachel Lott seemed willing to tell him a little more about the whole family situation, he pursued. "What do you mean you've been a disappointment?"

"Look at me. I've got everything going for me, and all I have to show for it is a perpetual hangover. Tom has been a wonderful husband. When my first marriage broke up, I wandered around for a lot of years in a drunken stupor. Tom married me, weaned me from the bottle, and reared my daughter like she was his own. No wonder America loves him." She took a mirror from her purse and began to straighten her dark hair. "I'm a real mess. I'd better get upstairs before the *paparazzi* spot me."

Shayne threw a tip down on the table and escorted her toward the cash register.

"All Tom would need is for one of those scandal sheets to see me like this," she continued. "You shouldn't have let me spend so much time looking back. We don't want another Lott's wife turning into a pillar of salt." She laughed nervously at her little joke and grabbed Shayne's arm. "Find my daughter, Mr. Shayne, please."

"Your daughter?" said the redhead, surprised that she seemed to know what had transpired upstairs.

"I was the one who insisted Tom bring you into this matter."

AS HE PAID THE BILL, THE BIG DETECTIVE KNEW HE HAD felt a tremor when she had spoken. Something lay beneath her surface ready to erupt. Part of it was the feeling he had had in the elevator — there was something he wasn't being told — and part of it was what she hadn't said: why, if her husband had taken the bottle from her hand, was she an alcoholic now?

After counting his change, Shayne noticed that Rachel Lott had wandered into the lobby. There the two bluesuited receptionists had closed in on her. Each grabbing one of her arms, they started to lead her to the elevator, but the lady just as obviously didn't want to go with them.

"Please, Mrs. Lott," said the taller. "Let's not make a scene."

"Excuse me, pal," interrupted Shayne by tapping the shorter one on the shoulder. "I couldn't help but notice you're having a slight communication problem with the lady. What she just said," he added in mock politeness, "is that she's with me, and if you don't take your hands off her, I'm going to break every lousy bone in them."

"Mr. Shayne, that won't be necessary," she protested.

One of the men grabbed the rawboned redhead's collar. "Do you have any trouble understanding this, Sir Walter Raleigh?"

Effortlessly the big detective grabbed the tough's hand and showed him his palm. Using the sudden leverage, Shayne had him on his knees instantly.

"William," screamed the bluesuit, "he's gonna bust my arm."

Whether he would have or not, Shayne was caught offguard by the seemingly instant blow to the back of his head. The man had learned something in bodyguard school, thought the redhead as he sprawled over the orange couch and onto an imitation marble coffee table.

Ernest got to his feet, and the two men started for the elevator door with Rachel Lott.

For her sake the redhead hadn't wanted a scene, but nobody manhandled Mike Shayne. With cat-like quickness he crossed the nearly empty lobby. Out of the corner of his eye he glimpsed a man with a huge nose raising a camera. The detective caught up with the trio pressing the elevator button.

"Hey, guys," he said loudly, "did they teach you this one in

California?"

William turned fast, the question mark on his face greeting a redhead roundhouse. The force of the blow slammed him through the opening elevator doors. Ernest's punch came toward the detective's head, but he ducked and snapped an elbow to the solar plexus. The bluesuited figure toppled backward, landing in the elevator on top of his companion.

Shayne reached in and punched GARAGE. "Going down," he called out.

Straightening his tie, he apologized to Rachel Lott.

"See what I mean," she said. "I'm nothing but trouble to everybody."

"No sweat, Mrs. Lott. You're the kind of trouble I can live with." He pushed the button for the penthouse elevator.

Her dark black eyes searched his grey steel for a moment, then she said, "Do you know who Paul Abraham is?"

"Abraham. Isn't he one of those TV preachers?"

"Yes, and his headquarters is up in Palm Beach. Why don't you try there."

The elevator door opened.

"Why there?"

"Mr. Shayne," she said as the door started to close, "find my daughter — find her before it's too late."

Shayne glanced around. The lobby was empty.

IV

HAD SHAYNE NOT KNOWN THAT BETHEL, AS PAUL ABRAHAM's estate was called, housed a religious organization, he would have thought he had walked into a corporate headquarters. From the mechanically polite security guard at the gate to the row of apple-pie-proper secretaries in the reception area to the symphonic whirr of distant computers, the offices of The Church of the Sun bristled with efficiency.

"I'm Susan. May you find The Sun," said a pretty brunette who looked like she had been raised on a strict diet of Kansas wheat and vanilla ice cream. "How may The Church help you?"

"I'd like to talk with Paul Abraham," said Shayne.

"I'm sorry, but The Reverend Abraham is in the Sunshine Chapel." She looked up at the giant overhead clock which like everything else was embedded in a sunburst logo. "I believe he's taping next Sunday's

Miracle Message. " She flipped through an appointment book. " Then there's reading and meditation."

"I really need to see him."

Her smile as large as the sun itself, she said, "Perhaps Mr. Asher could help you."

"Mr. Asher?"

"Mr. Asher is our business manager."

"I'm not a salesman."

"Oh, then you might want to talk to one of our Spiritual Counselors." She gestured toward a large open room in which rows of men and women who looked equally all-American were on phones, reading letters, and underlining papers with colored felt-tip markers.

"Mr. Asher will be fine," Shayne said.

"If you'll take a seat over there," she said, indicating a lounge with coffee and orange juice, "I'll try to find him."

"Thank you," smiled the redhead, glad he didn't have to take a number.

"May you find The Sun," she returned.

THE REDHEAD HADN'T SEEN THIS MANY HAPPY FACES SINCE he'd busted in on Debbie Richardson's coke party. He sat down amidst a pile of religious brochures — some were introductions to The Church of the Sun and some asked for donations. There wasn't a copy of a newspaper or *Sports Illustrated* anywhere. As he sipped some coffee from a crystal-clear cup with the familiar logo, he admitted to himself he felt uneasy. Not the uneasiness of a dark alley or a loaded .45, but the sensation that comes with encountering a different lifestyle. He had felt something akin to it when he had visited Saigon East, the Vietnam refugee pocket in downtown Miami, or even the haunts of the very rich. But still there was a difference. He walked down streets of cynicism, mistrust, deceit — here he sensed commitment, caring, optimism. These people seemed happily dedicated to what they were doing.

Maybe, thought the detective, it was just that he had never been much of a religious man. Sure he believed in heaven and hell, but he had seen so much of the latter it was hard to recognize, much less appreciate, the former.

Amidst his reverie he became aware of the background music for the first time. Like so many offices it was muzak, only these songs weren't standards or Top Forty, but up-tempo versions of familiar hymns.

Another thing he had to admit. This case was intriguing, as interesting as any he had ever worked. Normally, wandering person jobs bored the hell out of him, for they meant long hours reading records, interviewing acquaintances, tagging who-knows-who, and bargaining for information with the cops. This case was different. The few minutes he had spent with the Lotts had convinced him there was more at stake than just finding a college dropout.

"Sir," interrupted his thoughts.

Standing there with her "Look, ma, no cavities" smile was Susan. "Mr. Asher has a few minutes to see you."

SHE LED HIM DOWN A DIMLY LIT CORRIDOR AND INTO A huge, darkened room. The air conditioning which was running full blast sent a chill over Shayne's body.

"The cold is necessary so the equipment doesn't overheat," she said.

"Welcome to Bethel, Mr. Shayne," came a hollow voice from the darkness and then there was light. "I'm Jud Asher. Thank you, Susan."

The business manager stepped between a pair of TV cameras. Young, good-sized, and dressed in a three-piece grey suit, he looked to Shayne as though he captained the football team at All-American University.

"Thanks for meeting me in the studio," he said, shaking Shayne's hand. "I've got a few seconds between negotiations for our Autumnal Special. Susan," he called to the departing secretary, "check for me to see if Pearl Bailey's manager has called back."

"Certainly, sir," she answered through her Miss America smile.

"Whatever happened to the little church in the wildwood?" said Shayne.

"Like it or not," said Asher, "televangelism has become big business. The Church of the Sun is in direct competition with Robert Shuller's Crystal Cathedral, Oral Roberts' City of Faith, and Jerry Falwell's Liberty Mountain. Every Sunday morning our production, *The Miracle Message*, vies with these fine programs for viewers. Excuse me," he said, turning to a glowing monitor. He picked up a microphone. "Phil, shoot that segment again. Paul's looking at the congregation instead of the camera."

Shayne stared at the monitor. The silver-haired preacher in a rough-cloth robe was perched before a gleaming cross with a sunburst behind

it and thundering "Thou shall have no other gods before me" to an empty set of pews. "What congregation?"

"Oh, we'll add them to the final tape later. That's one of the miracles of television. We can edit in or out anything. You wouldn't expect us to try to return to the disaster of live television. What if in the Ray of Hope Prayer a child started crying? Those shut-ins that only we can reach might have their moment of meditation interrupted. The Church of the Sun's calling is to cast religion in its best possible light. But, how can I help you?"

The redhead held up the snapshot. "Have you seen this girl?"

Asher studied the photograph and shook his head. "No. What's her name?"

"Mary Elizabeth Lott."

"Neither the name nor the face is familiar, but after all the Church of the Sun is served by a staff of over a thousand. Right here at Bethel there are about one hundred and fifty devoted souls. If you'd like, I can get Susan to run the name and picture through our computers?"

Fifteen minutes later Susan handed Shayne a computer printout in the lounge area. "The West Coast called, and Mr. Asher was needed. We're sorry, but the person you asked about is not associated with The Church of the Sun."

"Thanks," he said, getting up and scanning the sheets.

"May you find The Sun," she smiled.

Shayne was handing the guard at the front gate the plastic security badge he had been given when he saw a lanky man with a blond beard running across the manicured lawn. Behind him sprinted two security guards.

Not twenty feet from the redhead a guard tackled the blue jeans and sweatsuited figure. Two other guards came running up, their nightsticks drawn.

"Look, buddy," said one of the guards, "how many times do we have to tell you to stay away from here?"

On his knees, his head tilted toward a second-story window, the figure screamed, "Mary Elizabeth, come back. I love you."

V

TWO SECURITY GUARDS JERKED THE JEANSED FIGURE TO HIS feet. "O.K., hophead," said one, "you know the way to the gate."

As the struggling blond came toward him, the older guard who was

still holding Shayne's security badge said, "Take it easy on him, Harry."

Harry strengthened his hammerlock. "You know they told us to keep this junkie creep out of here."

"That's no reason to break his arm," said the rawboned redhead.

"Hey, mister," answered the security guard on the other side, "you keep your nose out of this." His hand rested on his pistol butt.

Shayne's muscles tensed.

"Hold it, fellas," said the older guard. "There's no reason to fight, especially when you're about to tangle with Mike Shayne, Miami's toughest P.I." He turned toward Shayne. "They're just doing their job, though a bit too zealously."

Shayne winked at the guy.

"Harry," said the gatekeeper, "just put the kid outside the gate. Son, save yourself some trouble and stay away for good."

The redhead walked over to the bluejeaned figure and offered him a cigarette. The young man took a deep draw, coughed violently, then threw the butt to the pavement. "Tobacco. Man, that stuff's got tar and nicotine in it — deadly. You got anything more mellow?"

"Nothing but a few Mantovani cassettes," said Shayne sarcastically.

"Well, anyway, thanks for bailing me out back there." He held out his hand. "Rick Adams."

"Mike Shayne," said the detective, gripping the man's surprisingly large hand. "Who's this Mary Elizabeth you think's in there?"

"My fiancee, or ex-fiancee, and I know she's inside."

Shayne looked at the sweatshirt with the Florida American College eagle logo emblazoned across the chest. "You two go to school together?"

"We've been living together off and on for a year or so. Then, about six months ago I get this tearful phone call. She says she's doing the Guinevere thing. This Church of the Sun is going to be her convent retreat."

"Have you actually seen her or talked to her?"

"No. Yes," said Adams. His body was starting to shake.

"Take it easy," said the redhead, leading him to the Buick.

Adams rubbed his eyes and steadied himself against the hood. "I did talk to her once after she came here. She told me, or I think she told me, that she had to spend the rest of her life at this Bethel. I went to the local cops. They wouldn't even talk to me."

Shayne glanced at the tattered sweatshirt that was a far cry from the colorful silks the Palm Beach Police were used to dealing with. "Why does Mary Elizabeth feel she has to stay here?"

"I don't know. She wouldn't say. But what worries me most is the kind of people I've seen hanging around this place lately."

"Who?" said Shayne.

"Look, I'm no angel. The guys I've seen come and go from my van over there are the kind I make my buys from. You know, bad news." He started to shiver in the midst of the hot afternoon sun. "I'm scared, scared for Mary Elizabeth."

SHAYNE LOOKED DOWN AS ROURKE'S PLATE WAS BROUGHT to the table. A peach half, an ice-cream scoop of cottage cheese, and a dry piece of meat stared back uninvitingly.

"Gee, Tim, if I had known that's what you wanted," said the redhead, gesturing toward the overcooked slice of beef, "I wouldn't have thrown out that old pair of loafers this morning."

"Thanks, gumshoe," said the reporter. He pointed at Shayne's rare New York strip. "At least I don't have to worry about my dinner getting up and walking away. You know, shamus, you really should be more caloric conscious. I got on the scales the other day, and I had picked up a couple of pounds."

"Tim, your worrying about gaining weight is like Hershel Walker wondering where his next dime is coming from."

The star columnist for the *Miami Daily News* broke loose a few curds and said, "So you went on a pilgrimage to Palm Beach today. And what, pray tell, did you find at that shrine for the Gucci set?"

"The Church of the Sun."

"Did you become a full-fledged Sunnie?"

"Well, I didn't find The Sun, if that's what you're asking," answered the redhead, realizing he had hit another area of his reporter friend's expertise. "Seriously, Tim, what can you tell me about that group?"

While chewing the morsel for the thirty-fifth time, Rourke rolled back his eyes, and Shayne could almost hear the whirr of his internal computer.

"Paul Abraham," said the reporter after awhile, "has been its driving force. He started out twenty years or so ago as one of the best revivalists in the South. But the man had a vision. In the mid sixties he made the transition from tent to television."

"So he's been around for awhile."

"Paying his dues. About five years ago, despite his TV and radio network, he was still on the fringe of the golden circle."

"Graham, Shuller, and Roberts."

"You've been doing your homework. Anyway, Abraham wanted in, so he went out to the Beach and hired some public relations guy who had made a big splash in selling political candidates."

"Jud Asher. Only now he's selling *The Church of the Sun*."

"You've got the picture, shamus." Rourke paused for a drink of water. "About a year ago came a drastic change of Abraham's image. He put on a long robe, let his greying beard and hair grow, and added a touch of fire and brimstone. You know, the prophetic voice crying in the wilderness. Right now Abraham's radio network has been boosted to over one-hundred stations, and his Sunday-morning show ranks second only to Pat Robertson's *700 Club*."

"But he wants to be number one. Why?"

"It's estimated there's a religious audience of twenty million people out there. That's the strange thing, though. Money is not Abraham's message. Fact is he probably spends less air time than anybody asking for donations."

"So the image makeover worked?"

"Yes and no," said the reporter, poking at some uneaten curds with his fork. "I've watched him a couple of times, and he seems sincere in what he's doing. When his deep voice booms out and his eyes blaze, I can almost believe that what he has to say comes from higher than the TV transmitter."

"Awhile ago you mentioned 'Sunnies.' What did you mean?"

"A bad joke really. The Church of the Sun is about as far removed from a cult as my picks at Hialeah are from the winner's circle."

"He doesn't recruit kids, then," said the detective, thinking of Mary Elizabeth Lott. "Any hints of drugs or brainwashing?"

"Not even a whisper," said Rourke. "It looks like there are a bunch of bright minds behind those happy faces."

"You make Abraham sound like The Second Coming," said Shayne, recalling what Adams had said about the low-lives hanging around Bethel. "Nobody's that good."

"Your cynicism's showing again, shamus."

Shayne grinned and said, "Do you think he's going to reach number one?"

"You'll have to ask Arbitron, the ratings people, but I doubt it."

There are too many Swaggarts, Humbards, and Falwells out there. Unless he does something shocking, unique — hell, miraculous — he'll have to settle for his usual piece of the religious pie."

Shayne wiped his mouth. Both The Beef House and his friend had provided him with nourishment. He pulled out the rumpled pack of Camels. "One more thing, Mr. I.B.M."

"Shoot, user," said Rourke, spearing Shayne's potato skin.

"Lott, Thomas," said the detective lighting up.

"Say that name with reverence — you might just be talking about our future President."

"Might?"

"The Gallup Poll and some high muckety-mucks in the party tell me he's blue chip all the way. In fact, some say the four horsemen — and I don't mean of Notre Dame — couldn't stop his drive to the White House."

"Clean as a whistle, huh?"

"Cleaner," said Rourke, soaking up the juice on the redhead's plate with a roll. "Something wrong with that?"

"Nothing," Shayne muttered, deciding he was staring at a deadend manned by the Mister Cleans of church and state.

VI

THE ROPED-OFF AREA OF THE BEACH WAS CROWDED WITH cameras, lights, reflectors, sound equipment, and a good dozen people running around and shouting at each other. To Shayne it looked like a setup for one of those beach movies, but where were the buxom, bikini-clad lovelies and Arnold Schwarzenegger look-alikes? One man dressed in a blue linen shirt and white cotton slacks seemed the center of attention.

"O.K., senator," shouted a guy in yellow shorts and an orange-and-green flowered Hawaiian shirt, "just walk naturally along the water's edge. Quiet, everybody. That's it. Look pensive. The fate of the Western — nay, the entire world rests on what you see on the horizon."

"Quite a burden," said the redhead to Lockwood.

The press secretary adjusted his horn-rim glasses. "What? Oh, it's you, Shayne. Listen, I've been meaning to get back to you, to apologize for that little incident in the lobby. William and Ernest are really just two loveable teddy bears."

"Unless you steal their honey," quipped the big detective.

"What? Oh, yes. Mrs. Lott. That, as I'm sure you've deduced, is a sensitive area."

"Quiet on the set, you babbling monkeys," called the Hawaiian shirt to nobody in particular. "I've got to have quiet to make my statement."

"I think his shirt already has," said Shayne.

"Shirley is a bit abrasive," said Lockwood, "but the walls of his Manhattan apartment are literally covered with Clios. Those are . . ."

"The advertising world's Oscars," said Shayne, noticing a solitary figure in white seated in the shade of a rainbowed beach umbrella. A glass of orange juice dangled like a dead flower from the raven-haired woman's limp hand. "Why didn't you tell me about Mrs. Lott's drinking problem?"

"At the time I didn't think it was important."

"If you want me to work this case, I'll decide what's important."

"Since you're here, you must have some information. Tell me, what did you find out about our missing person?"

"I only talk to the man who pays the bills."

"Anything you can tell the senator you can tell me."

"If it's too much trouble to get Lott, I'll just wander over and tell the senator's wife."

"Wait, wait! I'm going for Tom. There'll be a break in the shooting any second," said Lockwood, patting Shayne on the arm, then hurrying off.

Looking over Rachel Lott's languid body, the redhead was sure they wouldn't put her in front of the cameras. Then why was she here? Show? Support? He remembered what Lockwood had said about the importance of image, but the Lott family was a long way from the Cleavers.

"Mr. Shayne," called the resonant voice, "it's a beautiful morning to be on the beach."

Lockwood framed the politician with his hands. "One man *can* make a difference. Great slogan, huh? One solitary figure against the sky."

"Supported by two cameras, three sound booms, four light racks, and a dozen gofers," said Shayne, staring through the cluttered beach.

Lott laughed boisterously. "I see you understand the ad biz, Mr. Shayne. It's a lot like the world of politics. Little reality, much illusion."

"Tom," said Lockwood like a scolding parent.

"Damn it, Ozzie. He's no reporter."

"At least," pleaded the press secretary, "go down by the beach to talk. You never know when somebody has a tape recorder."

Shayne could feel the sun-heated sand through his thinning loafers. Normally he found the surf spray and the waves slapping the shore soothing, but now, on the case, he forced his mind to think of business.

"Damned sand, ruins these leather shoes," said Lott. "Then again I probably shouldn't be wearing them at all. I might offend the alligator lobby."

Shayne fired up a Camel and held out the pack.

The senator reached forward, then stopped. "No. That's all I'd need — the cameras picking up the great environmentalist polluting Mother Nature and his body at the same time."

"Do you ever do anything you like?" Shayne said wryly.

"Not till the polls close."

Beneath Lott's armor of a fifty-dollar haircut, a Club Med tan, and a computer-programmed wardrobe, the detective sensed somebody else trying to get out. Asking himself if he could have so compromised himself was a foolish question, the redhead decided. The freedom to be who he was, to do what he wanted, was one of the major reasons he had become a P.I.

"You see me on the cover of *Newsweek* last year?" asked Lott.

The lanky detective shook his head, noting the senator wasn't in a hurry to discover what he had found out in a day.

"No matter," Lott continued. "The caption read, 'Making It All the Way.' Christ, Shayne, if I'm making it, why am I so damned unhappy. Ozzie tells me what I can and can't do, my wife has turned into an alcoholic — everybody else pulls my chain."

"Why don't you go back into cattle ranching?" said Shayne, trying to picture Lott as the Marlboro man.

"You can't go home again — especially when a large corporation bought the ranch."

Shayne exhaled slowly. "I found Mary Elizabeth."

"Geez, you work fast. Where?"

"I'm pretty sure she's at Bethel, the home base for The Church of the Sun."

Senator Lott gazed out at the horizon. "So the little tart got religion," he said half-aloud.

"What?"

Stopping before a surf-eroded sandcastle, he turned to Shayne. "Oh, nothing. I'm sure dear Rachel will be overjoyed with the good

news."

Shayne probed. "Lockwood didn't seem very excited about my telling your wife what I'd found."

"Ozzie should have worked for the CIA. He doesn't want any one person to know as much as he does, so he parcels out information. A piece here, a piece there." Suddenly his face blanched. "Crap. I can take that fag director, I can take reporters, but I can't take her — not now. Excuse me."

Clothed in white and staggering toward him like a wraith in the wind was Rachel Lott. Standing where her husband had been, she looked down at the decaying sculpture in sand. "It never lasts, does it?"

"Your husband didn't seem too interested that I found Mary Elizabeth."

"Terrific. Thomas has a lot on his mind, and his voting record on teenage runaway centers and toll-free hotlines is superb."

"Hold it," said the redhead. "You don't have to sell the senator to me."

"Of course not," she apologized. "Lockwood has me so programmed I say things without thinking. How is Beth?"

Shayne sensed her genuine concern. "As far as I know, she's O.K."

"Did you talk to her?"

"No."

She looked disappointed. "God, I worry so about her."

"Then why did you wait six months before you started looking for her?"

"How did you know that?"

"I ran into her old boyfriend."

"That piece of garbage. When she was young, she picked up every stray animal in the neighborhood, then every cold. When she started going to college . . ."

"I couldn't reach Abraham, but I did talk to the Church's business manager. He got me a printout of their staff, and she wasn't one of the employees. In fact, everybody there denied she was there except Rick Adams."

"And you believed him?"

Shayne paused to reflect. She was right. It was paradoxical, but despite how he felt about the church staff, he also believed the blond-haired kid. "Don't worry. I'm going back there, and this time I'm going to talk to her, even if I have to shake the pillars of Bethel."

She knelt down and started to reform the sandcastle. A sudden wave

slapped against her. She stood up drenched. Her white caftan clung wetly to her skin, showing the redhead that she had nothing on beneath it. She reached up and stroked his hair. "You know, Samson, I believe you just might."

"Rachel," called the senator as he came toward them.

Her warm hand withdrew suddenly.

"Rachel," he continued, "I tried to talk him out of it, but that twit of a director insists you be in one shot." Lott reached out and put his hand on her shoulder. As if he had electricity in his fingers, she jumped.

"Thomas, dear," she said sharply, "there are television people at breakfast, television people in the afternoon, and television people showing up late at night. I'd rather spend an eternity in hell than one minute in front of that damned camera."

She and Lott walked off in opposite directions.

Locked in Shayne's mind was the moment when Lott had touched his wife. Her face looked like she had just witnessed some unspeakable horror.

VII

AS SHAYNE PULLED OFF THE I-95 EXIT RAMP, THE STERN FACE of Paul Abraham appeared on a billboard like a Biblical prophet. "HE Is Coming," the solitary caption lept out as though emblazoned in fire. With all the televangelist's recent success, the big detective wondered to whom the pronoun referred.

It was eight on the nose when he parked outside the gate. As soon as the limo with a SATTEL license plate pulled out, the redhead approached the old man at the gate.

"You back?" said the grey-haired guard. "You seemed pretty interested in that college kid yesterday, and to tell the truth he's got me worried."

"How come?"

"For weeks now that beat-up van of his has been showing up early every morning, and that kid just stands out there looking up. Sometimes he interrupts his vigil to sneak in, and we got to throw him out."

"So?"

"Look."

Shayne noticed the van was parked across the street, but there was no blond-haired pilgrim to be seen.

"It was here this morning even 'fore I got here," said the guard.

"I don't mind admitting I'm kinda worried."

"Come on," said Shayne.

"Harry," called the gatekeeper to the younger guard coming out of the mansion, "get in here."

"What's it like," said Shayne, "guarding the gates to heaven?"

The old man laughed. "Mr. Abraham used to come out every day, walk around the grounds, chew the fat with us like a regular guy. Funny, I haven't seen him 'cept on television for a month or so. Nobody in there'll say a thing, and we've been getting some rough types, the kind that when I worked for the Palm Beach force we ran outta town. But, hey, I'm paid now just to watch the gate, not to make up the guest list."

Shayne peered through the van's windshield. Nothing. The side doors were locked. He walked to the rear and found the double doors unlocked. The redhead looked in.

"You'd better call the police," he said.

"Why?"

The matted red streaks in the blond hair and the motionless chest told the big detective that Rick Adams had toked his last joint.

"We got a body that won't be keeping a vigil any longer," was all he said.

Standing alone, the detective found himself by habit tossing the van with his trained eyes. He had been a P.I. too long to touch anything, but then he noticed a bulge in the left sock, a bulge that wouldn't have been visible in the darkness. Taking his handkerchief, he peeled the sock back, and a small notebook fell out.

Using a pencil eraser the redhead began to turn the pages. It was a record going back to mid-July complete with times and dates. But of what? Sometimes there were names and sometimes letter-number combos. License plates. That was it. Were they people Adams had made buys from, sold to?

One name stuck out. SATTEL. The license he had seen as he arrived. Could the notebook be a record of those who had visited Bethel while the kid was watching? There was one way to find out.

Shayne jogged across the street to the guardhouse. The old man was alone now.

"You get the cops?" said Shayne.

"On their way."

"If it's all the same to you, being from out-of-town, I'd rather not be over there to greet them."

"Know just what you mean."

"By the way," said the redhead as he lit two Camels and handed the guard one, "you'd better not let anybody near the body."

"Let me find Harry to take over in here."

"Go ahead. I'll do it. You helped me yesterday."

The guard nodded and headed across the street. Quickly the redhead backtracked through the visitor's log while holding the notebook beside it with his handkerchief. The two lists were identical — nearly.

There were a few early-morning guests not on Adams' list and a few late-night visitors not in Bethel's log.

He copied down the discrepancies on a piece of paper and shoved it in his pocket. Then he took the phone off the hook.

Back at the van he said to the guard, "Phone call."

"Don't touch anything," warned the security guard as he left.

Hearing the sirens in the distance, the redhead, still clutching the notebook in his handkerchief, slipped it back inside the sock.

ROURKE WAS SLUMPED OVER HIS NEWSROOM DESK AS IF IN prayer.

"What's the matter, Tim?" said Shayne. "The muse out to lunch?"

"Yeah," he said waving a carrot stick, "and I wish I was with her." He offered the redhead a celery spear.

Shayne waved it off. "What can you tell me about S&G Productions?"

Rourke tapped a key on his VDT, and the monitor came alive. "Why do you want to know?"

"I just had Motor Vehicles run down a few license plates," said the big detective, not bothering to explain that they were on Adams' list but not on Bethel's official visitors' log..

"Of course, I get the exclusive."

"Of course."

Rourke punched a few keys. "S&G Productions. Miami-based film production company."

"Anything else?"

"Let's see what the boys in the Business section have stored." He tapped again, and the screen started to light up. "Bingo. Small-time porno film packager. Hardcore stuff. Had a few run-ins with Will Gentry's boys. Postal Inspector was after them. Some kind of cease-and-desist order on interstate mailings. Wait a minute. Oh, you're gonna love this one. Guess who absorbed S&G less than a year ago?"

"Uncle."

"Dextros, Ltd."

"Fat Dominic Ferrari's operation. The mob."

Rourke continued, "According to Business' research, Dextros has been diversifying into the communications field."

It hit Shayne like an ice-water enema. "Punch up SATTEL for me."

"Don't need to," said the reporter as he pulled out another vegetable stick. "Blue-chip investment. Do you know anything about satellites?"

"I remember the day the Russians put Sputnik in orbit."

"The big thing now is putting them in geosynchronous orbits. They're out there on the southwestern horizon. Sixteen birds four degrees apart. Only SATTEL with its SATTEL II has the choicest footprint."

Shayne looked at him strangely.

"Broadcast area. SATTEL II's got line-of-sight to virtually every state in the country."

"So if you're on their satellite, you're national."

"Yeah, and I just read where one of those twenty-four hour payable services folded leaving one of SATTEL's transponders free."

"Transponder?"

"Channel, but whoever wants it is going to have to pay through the nose."

For the first time the TV set in Shayne's mind was starting to receive a picture.

VIII

IT HAD BEEN DARK FOR HALF AN HOUR WHEN SHAYNE MADE his move. Nobody was going to allow him to look around, even for somebody who wasn't there. Yesterday the redhead had caught only a quick glimpse of the security, but he had seen enough to know he was going to have to go in over the wall.

Blending into the palm shadows, he climbed the hard stucco easily. The black slacks and turtleneck blended in as he noiselessly landed on Bethel's manicured lawn. Maybe it was the body being found across the street, but there seemed to be more guards than usual.

Crossing the open space to the house without being seen demanded split-second timing to avoid the guards' routine, but he did it. A solitary seagrape flapping in the evening wind was the only access to his destination, the second-story window he had seen Adams staring

at.

The tree swayed with his weight as he climbed higher. Heavy, wrought-iron bars criss-crossed the large window. To keep people out or to keep someone in, he wondered?

Through a half-open window he heard two men talking.

"You know what he said," argued one. "She's had a hard time of it. This is for her own good."

"I dunno," said the other. "She's been on the stuff so long she acts like a zombie most of the time."

Shayne tried to peer through the screen.

"Just shut up and do your job," said the forceful first voice.

A door slammed. Shayne adjusted his position. A blonde girl sat propped up in a canopied bed, her eyelids drooping.

"Mary Elizabeth," the redhead whispered. "Mary Elizabeth Lott."

"Who's there? Where are you?" she called feebly.

Her voice seemed to Shayne like that of a child learning to speak. "The window," he said. "I'm a friend."

"The angel," she said. "You've come. Just like he said."

"Come over to the window," urged Shayne, raising his voice.

She swung her legs off the side of the bed, and slowly she stood up. Shayne swallowed hard at what he saw.

The bright light from below sliced through the seagrape leaves.

"Who's up there?" said a voice from the ground. "Whoever you are, you'd better come on down."

The price was right, so Shayne gave him what he wanted.

Swinging out on a limb, he dropped on the surprised guard like a big cat pouncing on its prey. Sitting on the man's chest, the powerful redhead swung a hard right, and the guard was out.

A whistle came from the direction of the guardhouse, and then light flooded the lawn.

"There he is."

"Get him."

"Don't let him get away."

Shayne sprinted across the yard, put one foot on a concrete bench, and launched himself toward the top of the wall as he had on Will Gentry's obstacle course, only now he wasn't competing against the clock.

A bullet thudded into the stucco as he rolled over the top and dropped to the road.

Shayne didn't like hurtling walls and he didn't like being shot at, but

one thing bothered him more than those — what he had seen on the second floor of Bethel's main house.

Mary Elizabeth Lott was pregnant.

BEFORE HE WENT BACK TO THE LOTTS, THE RANGY REDHEAD had to check out one last hunch. The gatekeeper at the Bal Harbour estate seemed surprised to see him, but gladly escorted him up to the house.

"Shayne," said the tagman, spitting out a wad of chewing tobacco, "you're either crazy coming here or you got more balls than a well-hung tomcat."

As the big detective was led through a basketball-court size gym to a training room, he recalled his satisfaction at having blown up his host's yacht in the culmination of mutual hatred. In the middle of a cavernous redwood hot-tub floated Dominic Ferrari.

"What the hell are you doing here?" said the mob leader.

"I was taught that when you're in the neighborhood," Shayne answered, "it's good manners to drop in on old friends."

"After the way you torched my boat, took out some of my best boys, and even burnt the hair off my eyebrows. Tell me, wiseguy, why haven't I had you wasted?"

"Speaking of waists, fat boy," said the redhead, "my guess is that you need to keep a low profile more than you do a slender one. You're dealing with something sensitive."

"Oh, yeah," said Ferrari, spilling his glass of wine. "Like what?"

Shayne leaned over the hot water and inches from Ferrari's hog-jowled face struck a match. The heavy gang leader flinched. Shayne held up a Camel to his lips. "You shouldn't be so nervous, Ferrari. I mean, why should the FCC bother themselves with a puff piece by a Magic City journalist named Rourke about how a certain overweight crime overlord has bought himself into the television business so that he can use a spot on a satellite to flood the country with hardcore pornography?"

"Hymie," screamed the whale as though he had been suddenly harpooned.

The muscular tagman came running up.

"Go get Limbo, now," commanded Ferrari.

So his guess had been on target, thought the redhead. But what part did Paul Abraham play in all this? A preacher and porn — it didn't figure.

"Hey, smart guy," said Ferrari, refilling his glass from a crystal decanter, "I've got clout of my own in the capital. You'd better back off."

Shayne was about to downshift Ferrari when he sensed a presence behind him. Turning quickly, he saw a mammoth figure stride through the door. Oil glistened from the overly developed musculature of the black giant.

"Mr. Shayne, Limbo," said Ferrari.

"No thanks," answered the redhead. "I've never been much for dancing."

"Limbo," said the half-submerged boss, "show our smart-mouthed guest the door — then throw him through it."

"Yes, bass," said the lilting British accent.

White teeth gleaming, the giant glided toward the detective. Before Shayne could react to the surprising speed, he was clamped by two huge arms that raised him from the floor like a forklift.

"Come with Limbo," said the black man.

"My pleasure," Shayne said, realizing the uselessness of struggle at this point.

They had just entered the weight room when Shayne made the move his *sensei* Greg Chen favored. Snapping his head back with force, he caught the giant across the bridge of the nose. He heard the distinctive crack and a moan.

"You hurt Limbo, bass. Now Limbo hurt you," said the black man as he dropped Shayne.

The redhead reacted with a quick elbow to the stomach. It was as hard as the stucco wall he had earlier climbed. The detective followed with a quick right-left combination. The only thing damaged was his knuckles.

With a high-pitched laugh the giant backhanded Shayne with a force that drove him across the room into a stand of weights. Barbells tumbled noiselessly to the floor.

"Limbo still need to do fifty repetitions of two-hundred pounds. Bass, you look just the right weight." The giant scooped Shayne up, threw him over his head, and began to pump up and down. The redhead had never felt so helpless. If he let the giant keep this up, he'd be dead weight for sure.

Shayne looked up. Over his head was a high bar used in gymnastics. Grunting, he reached out for the bar at the apex of Limbo's lift and yanked himself free. He swung up, then with all his might hurled

himself downward.

His loafers caught the giant flush on the jaw.

The black man tumbled back and hit the mats with a thud.

Dropping to the floor, Shayne rushed his fallen opponent. Five pounds of weight, Greg Chen had said, five pounds of weight from the side is all it takes to dislocate a knee.

Shayne gave the right sidekick a few extra pounds. It didn't cost that much to send the very best, he reasoned. The crack told him that Limbo was definitely out of this year's Mr. Olympia contest.

Throwing the pain-stricken giant over his shoulder, Shayne stumbled back to the training room. "Don't get up, Moby Dick," he said to the startled Ferrari. With a heave the detective deposited the injured weightlifter in the hot tub. As the water splashed about, the redhead said, "A little whirlpool treatment will have him like new in no time."

When he got back to the hotel-apartment, Spencer, the new night clerk who had come down from Boston looking for a job, handed him six messages. Dated fifteen minutes apart, they all said the same thing: "I must see you tonight."

The notes listed a Miami Beach address and were signed by Rachel Lott.

IX

THE ADDRESS TURNED OUT TO BE A NEW CONDO COMPLEX on the beachfront. Shayne gave the night watchman in the lobby the number.

The guard looked down at his clipboard. "Apartment 504. Go right on up. Miss Judge is expecting you."

Shayne could have done without the wink, but he didn't mind admitting that Rachel Lott intrigued him as a client and as a woman. Something in her eyes said she had a story to tell, and something in her body language said more.

She was combing her thick, dark hair as she opened the door.

"Miss Judge, I presume," said Shayne.

She smiled and let him in. "A necessary subterfuge, I'm afraid."

There was no subterfuge about her wine-red lounging pajamas, Shayne decided. Her ample breasts heaved and played peekaboo with him.

"You saw what I have to go through every day," she explained. "This is where I come to get away by myself."

Everything from the doorman's wink to the background music that seemed to come out of the walls suggested to the redhead her retreat was hardly solitary. She filled a highball glass with ice, added some Martell, and handed it to him.

"My husband's report," she said, "noted your preference in drinks, among other things."

"What's so urgent?" said the detective, knowingly asking a dumb question.

"Come into the living room."

Shayne followed her into a room that must have been the centerfold in *Condo Beautiful*. As she sat down on a large, multi-pillowed white couch, she pressed a remote-control device. A large screen rose up slowly from a polished wood cabinet. "I made a mistake," she said, slipping a cassette into a video replay unit.

The screen lit up with Paul Abraham delivering a sermon. His hair was shorter and a little darker, he was dressed in a dark-grey, three-piece suit, and his voice and manner were noticeably less animated. His eyes, Shayne noticed, seemed less fiery.

"That's Paul Abraham one year ago," she said.

"I never would have guessed you went in for collecting The Best of TV Evangelism. Is Billy Graham next?" quipped the redhead.

Ignoring him, she popped in another cassette and sat down beside him. Shayne was confused. This was the first time he had been invited up to see etchings and had really been shown etchings, even on tape.

"Watch his eyes," she said.

As the bearded figure on the screen harangued what Shayne knew was a non-existent crowd, the detective noticed Abraham's phraseology had changed from vintage Jimmy Swaggart to King James. The "thees" and "thous" were punctuated by wild arms swinging and fingers pointing. And the eyes — they burned like red-hot coals.

"Something's wrong with Paul," she said, switching off the cassette. "I hardly recognize him."

The use of Abraham's first name stuck in his mind. "Why are you so concerned about him?" he asked.

She sipped white wine from a nearly empty glass. "Years ago Paul was a very kind, a very moral man, but not very ambitious. I guess I was living in the past when I did it."

"When you sent your daughter to be with him," the redhead concluded.

"It didn't take you long to figure that out," she said. "Last March

Beth seemed to be having difficulties."

"What kind?"

"Emotional. One minute calm, the next crying. It was the day after her birthday party. Tom had taken us out to dinner the night before. I got a little drunk, and they had to put me to bed. I woke up to find Beth almost hysterical."

"What was wrong?"

"I think it was that boyfriend of hers. They'd been experimenting with drugs. If I had that Rick Adams here right now, I'd wring his neck."

"You're too late," said Shayne. "Somebody shot him this morning."

"Oh, my God," she gasped. The empty wine glass was shaking.

"Did you really think Bethel was a safe refuge for a mixed-up pregnant girl?"

"Pregnant!" she screamed. "Beth, pregnant?"

Shayne mentally kicked himself. He had assumed it was just another of those things she was keeping from him.

"You're lying." She began to pound her fists on his broad chest. "You're lying." Her screaming gradually died down to sobbing. "I'm being paid back for what I did to Paul."

Shayne took the trembling woman, who was already in his arms, and held her tightly. He didn't try to tell her he understood, because how could he? He didn't even try to tell her everything would be okay because he didn't know that.

Rachel Lott put her arms around him and tried to cut down the already small gap between them. "I need you," she said.

Her cheek rubbed against his and Shayne caught a wiff of an exotic fragrance. Her lips began to nuzzle his neck. Then her warm, open mouth sought his.

It was more than being caught off-guard. Shayne knew what kept him from pulling back. At that moment he realized he was almost a life-support system for her. She was coupled to him as though his very breath, his very being sustained her.

She moaned softly and her fingernails tried to pierce his polo shirt.

Behind them the door flew open. "So, Shayne, you're the latest rooster in my wife's love nest."

What bothered the redhead even more than the accusation was what was in Thomas Lott's hand, a long-barreled Colt .45.

X

RACHEL LOTT JUMPED UP. "HOW DARE YOU BREAK IN here!"

"How dare I?" he said incredulously. "How dare you do this to me."

"I dare because there's always one more fund raiser, one more TV spot that just has to be made."

"After all I've done for you. Aren't you the one who told me you loved me because I was so ambitious?"

Shayne couldn't help feeling that he was caught in the middle of a B-movie he had seen too many times. Busy husband neglects beautiful wife, beautiful wife finds diversion. He didn't want to be a member of that supporting cast.

"It's not what you think," said the redhead, realizing anything would sound cliched.

Lott looked down the barrel. "Hell, what does it matter anyway?" He reholstered the gun. "My career's going down the tubes."

"What do you mean?" asked his wife.

"For years the local mob's been trying to stuff me in their back pocket — with no luck. I've stayed as pure as the driven snow since I sold the ranch and entered politics, but do you know what I found out? The land-management corporation that took over the ranch is a front for the mob. Even though I've been clean," he said, "when the press starts gearing up for the campaign and all those young investigative Woodward and Bernsteins start digging, it won't look that way."

"In politics," said Shayne, "it's not what you are — it's what people think you are."

"About that Ozzie's absolutely right," said Lott. "A piece of shit named Dominic Ferrari has been putting pressure on me lately, even sent by some friends of his in television. Holding the fort against those scum hasn't been difficult until last week. That's when they brought me some pictures."

"Of me?" said Rachel Lott. "Here?"

At the same moment Shayne thought how etched in guilt this case was and remembered the guy with the big nose in the Buccaneer lobby. He said, "What kind of pictures?"

"They've had a photographer stalking this family for a month. They just showed me some very candid photos of Mary Elizabeth."

"Beth," exclaimed his wife. "Doing what?"

The redhead, thinking of S&G's reputation for hardcore porn, said, "Smut shots?"

"I wish that was all they showed," said Lott.

"My God," said the darkhaired woman, "what's going on around here?"

Lott sat down on the couch, refilled his wife's wine glass, and tossed it down. "Mary Elizabeth murdered a man," he said.

"Murdered?" said Shayne. "Are you sure?"

"One of their slime showed me these pictures." He hurled down a snapshot as though it had burned his fingers.

Rachel Lott picked it up slowly. In a white dress her daughter stood over a fallen figure in black. In her hand was a bloody knife.

Rachel Lott fainted.

Senator Lott grabbed his wife, and the redhead picked up the 3x5. In the photo's background he recognized the silver hair and burning eyes of Paul Abraham.

Shayne urged the Buick over 80 miles-per-hour as they headed up I-95. He knew it was important to get to Bethel in a hurry. A storm was coming in from the East. Still woozy, Rachel Lott sat in the seat beside him resting against the cashmered shoulder of her husband. Both were silent, and even though the two were touching, there seemed to be a gulf between them the size of the Atlantic Ocean.

The detective couldn't remember a case with so many surprises. Just when he thought he was putting things together, someone would add another piece to the puzzle. No matter how many times he reshaped it, though, one image remained at its center, Mary Elizabeth Lott.

"How much farther?" came Rachel Lott's weak but urgent voice.

"Not long," said the redhead, pulling around a slow truck. "There's one thing I think you should tell me. Bethel's not a religious retreat, and it's certainly not a summer camp. Why did you send your daughter there?"

"You," said Lott to his wife, "sent Mary Elizabeth to that place?"

"Thomas, you never pressured me about my life before I met you. I always appreciated that. You see, years ago I was much more concerned with money, position, fame than with love. All that really mattered to me was success. Then, of course, you came along and I got all the things I thought I wanted. But all those false idols really did was to make three lives miserable."

Lott said slowly, "If you want to talk about guilt . . . "

"Ssssh . . . let me finish," said his wife, placing a finger on his lips. "When we couldn't make Beth happy and I saw the kind of crowd she was running with, I took a desperate chance."

"What kind of chance?" said Lott.

"I sent her to a man she never knew, my first husband, her father." She pointed up at the huge billboard on the off-ramp bearing the imposing image of Paul Abraham.

XI

THE THUNDERHEADS WERE GATHERING OVER THE OCEAN, and the first few drops of rain leaked down on the windshield as Shayne pulled up in front of Bethel. The cloud-covered moon shone down on the beat-up van that still sat across the street.

It didn't take the redhead long to talk his way through the security gate. After all, they knew him, and he had Senator Thomas Lott with him.

The guard in the otherwise-empty lobby told the trio that though it was late and though they had had some trouble earlier that night, Mr. Asher could be found in the studio. Shayne, remembering the way, found it much easier going through Bethel without being shot at.

The studio felt like the inside of a freezer to the redhead. Rachel Lott was nervous and her husband strangely silent when they found the business manager hunched over the glow of an editing machine.

In his shirt sleeves, Asher stood up and said, "Senator Lott, we are honored to have you at Bethel."

"Cut the crap," said the redhead. "The Lotts want to see their daughter — now."

"Really, Shayne," said Asher, turning his eyes away, "when you came by yesterday, I didn't know you were working for the senator." He walked away from them a bit. "The Reverend Abraham swore me to secrecy. You know she's a very troubled young woman, and well, he thought he was the only one who could help her."

Shayne was more worried than he let on. The pregnant girl, her medication, the droopy eyelids, the way she had thought him an angel. A terrifying thought broke into his consciousness. "Where is she?" he said.

"I'll tell you in just a moment, but there's something else you have to know." His sigh was so deep it seemed almost to deflate his body. "Actually I'm glad you three showed up. I can't cover it up any longer.

Something's very wrong with the Reverend Abraham."

Her voice on the edge of hysteria, Rachel Lott said, "I told you he had changed, changed utterly."

Remembering the face on the videotape, the big detective squeezed her hand gently and said, "In what way?"

"This is very difficult to explain to lay people," said the business manager, "but the pressures on a TV evangelist are enormous."

"Especially," said Shayne, "when he's into a high-stakes bidding war for a satellite transponder."

Asher regrouped himself from the obvious shock of what Shayne knew and said, "That's a big part of it, and heaven knows I've tried to discourage him from his so-called master plan. He wants to use a satellite hookup to go national with *The Miracle Message*, and he wants to be broadcasting in less than three months. He's been telling me that he has something that will bring twenty-million or so cable subscribers and earth-station owners into the fold, so to speak, something so he'll have the highest-rated religious program on the air."

"But the push to be number one seems slowly but surely to be wrecking him," Shayne concluded.

"It's my fault," said Rachel Lott. "I drove him to that, always harping on the need for more money and prestige. No wonder he left when I was pregnant with Beth."

Asher's eyebrows raised in recognition. "I've always thought the Jezebel in his sermons was more than a Biblical reference."

Lott, who had remained silent, said, "Rachel, you're no more to blame than I am."

"Thomas, you're sweet," she answered, "but this is one you can't take care of for me."

Bringing them back to the problem at hand, Shayne said, "If Abraham's having some kind of mental breakdown . . ."

"My God," said the darkhaired woman.

"I'm afraid so," admitted Asher. "I've seen it coming for weeks, but he's refused to seek any kind of help. He just kept repeating what all those radio and TV spots and billboards are saying, 'HE is coming,' no matter what I argued."

"Where is Abraham now?" said Shayne.

"And Beth?" said Rachel Lott.

"My guess is the chapel," said Asher. "He insists on taking her in there every night just before midnight."

"She's in there with a madman," gasped the darkhaired woman.

"Come on," said Shayne.

ASHER LED THEM ACROSS A WET COURTYARD AND PAST A fountain. The rain was falling steadily, and in the distance thunder cracked. They entered two large oaken doors beneath a stained-glass rosa.

None of them was prepared for what was taking place in the chapel.

Standing behind the raised pulpit backed by the chrome cross, Paul Abraham waved his arms frantically. Even from the back of the chapel Shayne was aware of the wildness in his eyes and the fury in his voice.

Like a solitary voice crying in the wilderness, the evangelist indicted the empty pews. "Sinners, hear my words," Abraham screamed, "He is coming, soon, and this time not in love but in the wrath in which he was conceived. Not as the suffering servant, but as the eternal judge. Not to comfort you, but to make you writhe."

Shayne suddenly noticed the blonde figure on the altar below Abraham. Her face was contorted, and her body jerked spasmodically.

Overhead, the swollen skies ripped open by golden streaks of lightning spoke in thunder.

Above Mary Elizabeth Lott Abraham preached on oblivious to her suffering or the stunned figures in the rear of the chapel. "Heed my words, sinners, or I shall visit my all-consuming wrath upon you."

The wind slammed open the oak doors.

"Oh, no," Rachel Lott screamed. "Paul thinks he is God."

"We've got to put a stop to this," said Asher, starting down the aisle. "Paul, listen to me," he called. "You need help. Come down."

Abraham noticed his aide's approach. He pointed a condemning finger and bellowed, "You, you betrayer. You are the chief sinner of all. I trusted you as a friend, and you gave me over to mine enemies."

"Paul, you're talking crazy," called Asher.

"You thought I didn't know, that I was too involved in my ministry, that I wouldn't notice you stealing from the church. And your whispers to the satellite people to turn them against me."

"Paul, you're wrong."

"Blasphemer, I tell you that at this moment, upon the altar my new son shall be born, and he will be about his father's business."

Shayne heard a gasp, and Rachel Lott, her face covered with the same horror he had seen on the beach, collapsed. Her husband immediately went to her and cradled her in his arms.

The redhead, also turning toward the darkhaired woman, halted as

he heard Mary Elizabeth wail in prolonged agony. "She needs a doctor," he said.

"Stay back," shouted the minister as Shayne came to help her. "I command you. He is coming. He is coming. Are the cameras ready so that the world will see the righteousness of my cause?"

Shayne found it difficult to accept the inevitable conclusion: that the billboards, *The Miracle Message*, the satellites had all pointed toward — Paul Abraham's master plan. In his demented state the televangelist had somehow convinced himself that the child being born was the new messiah. Only this time the star in the east announcing the birth was an electronic one.

The redhead started for the white-robed blonde. He had seen enough women in her condition on the streets to know that she was in real trouble if she didn't get medical attention — and fast.

Abraham shook his fist. "Be gone, you vipers."

"Look out," Asher screamed. "That maniac's going to hurt her."

As Shayne bent down over the writhing girl, a gun exploded behind him.

Abraham clutched his breast.

The detective turned to see the gun in the hand of Jud Asher. The snub-nose fired again.

Abraham jerked backward.

Shayne brought his hand up quickly. Asher's pistol exploded as it hurtled from his hand. Then Asher's face paled.

"Judas," bellowed Abraham. He had ripped the chrome cross from its supports, and now, holding it over his bloodstained head in a show of superhuman strength, the dying preacher hurled it downward.

Asher, frozen in fear and acceptance of the inevitable, crumbled under the weight of the heavy metal cross.

The fire gone from his eyes, Abraham tumbled forward and landed on the mangled body of his enemy.

Shayne momentarily shuddered. Their faces, reflected in the chrome, appeared like something in a funhouse mirror — distorted, hideous, and grotesque.

But Mary Elizabeth wasn't beyond help — yet. "Lott," he yelled, "get off the floor and call an ambulance." The redhead threw his coat over the girl and tried to calm her.

"No more medicine," she coughed. "God, it hurts . . . must tell Reverend Abraham about Jud."

"Easy," said Shayne. "The nightmare's over. No more medicine,

no more locked rooms." He knew now that she had discovered Asher's secret as had Abraham, that the business manager had been bleeding the church dry. He knew too that the drugs were how Asher had controlled her, had prevented her from telling. As he wiped her damp brow gently, the picture grew clearer. The photo that Thomas Lott had shown him had been a setup, and the only person who could have planned it was the one who controlled her through drugs. And, since the mob was trying to use the 3x5 for blackmail, Asher had to be in their pocket. That would also explain why he had advised Abraham against the satellite — because Ferrari wanted it. At that moment too Shayne would have made book that if Rourke ran the list of mob-owned businesses, the public relations firm Asher had been hired from would have been on it.

Shayne was conscious of sobbing, but it wasn't Mary Elizabeth. On his knees before the altar was Thomas Lott.

"Forgive me," begged the Senator.

Before Shayne could react, Lott pulled out the .45 he had pointed at the redhead earlier that evening.

The big detective, hindered by the girl in his arms and his left hand flying for the .38 in the small of his back, was confused. What was going on?

Unflinchingly Thomas Lott stuck the long barrel in his mouth and pulled the trigger.

XII

IT HAD BEEN A WEEK SINCE WHAT THE MIAMI DAILY NEWS had called "the biggest storm to hit since the flood." Shayne really didn't know why, couldn't rationally explain to Lucy why he had just gotten up in the middle of a candlelight dinner in her apartment and had driven up to Palm Beach.

The security guards were gone now, and Rourke had said that with Paul Abraham gone Bethel was being sold to some prominent Gold Coast family. The big redhead strode across the grounds. The fountain had been turned off, withered palm fronds littered the yard, and the stained-glass rosa had somehow cracked in the storm.

Rourke had picked up the story where Shayne had left off. The detective had been right. Ferrari had planted Asher in Abraham's organization to insure The Church of the Sun didn't get the satellite transponder. Everything would have worked perhaps had not 1) Mary Elizabeth been sent to Bethel and 2) Paul Abraham gotten caught up in

a zealot's dream.

Looking up at the distorted image on the rosa, the redhead realized that nothing was safe from the corruption of evil. Not the family, not the government, not even the church. What had changed, thought Shayne, in over 2000 years?

He didn't expect to see them kneeling at the front of the empty sanctuary. They had been drawn unexplainedly too. He started forward, the plush carpet muffling his footsteps.

The last time he had seen the two women was at the hospital. The doctors had saved Mary Elizabeth, but not the baby. Mary Elizabeth had told her mother that the child was fathered by Rick Adams, the kid Shayne was sure Ferrari had had killed when he caused trouble.

Shayne marvelled at the ability of both women to endure the grief of three funerals. Mary Elizabeth had been told for the first time who her father was, only to realize she had lost him permanently. And Rachel Lott had lost the two men in her life.

But mother and daughter at least had each other, and that was something. Possibly a new beginning. Shayne knew it was one he would not taint with the knowledge of who the real father of Mary Elizabeth Lott's child was. That moment of drunkenness on the night of Mary Elizabeth's birthday celebration was best forgotten. He was thankful that neither woman had seen the guilt-ridden attempt at atonement by Senator Thomas Lott.

Shayne stood there a long time thinking. As the first light peeked through the shattered rosa prismatically, the redhead turned and walked away. He envied the two women. They had found a little piece of the sun. He'd have to wait for another day. ●

She wanted only the best for her little girl, and she was going to get it — no matter who stood in the way!

Stage Mother

by PATRICK SCAFFETTI

“Smile, Dottie, smile. For God’s sake, look happy Flounce a little more so that your curls bounce, Dottie Stop glancing at your feet, Dottie. Look straight ahead and smile. Show those perfect teeth. As soon as you stop smiling, your dimple disappears Move your feet faster, Dottie. Keep time to the music.”

The nine-year-old girl’s breath hissed through clenched teeth, and pulsing, rushing sounds filled her head. Still, Dottie heard her mother’s shouted commands and struggled to obey them. She drew her lips back into a wider grin and tightened her facial muscles to deepen her dimple. She clicked her heels on the hardwood floor with manic abandon, sending her blonde curls into a jiggling dance of their own.

“That’s better, Dottie,” Lillian said, as breathless as her daughter. “Much better. You can’t let up for even a moment.”

Dottie could feel a painful stitch gnawing at her side, and her heart pounded wildly. But she couldn't slow down. Like a mechanical doll wound almost to the breaking point, Dottie continued to hop, skip, twirl, and tap across the floor. The racing beat of Tommy Dorsey's band drifted in and out of her mind, but her feet seemed to follow the rhythm by themselves.

The room appeared to whirl about Dottie as disjointed images flashed before her eyes. A rolled up carpet — an open window framing blue sky — a large cabinet radio — a bed with a rumpled white chenille spread — pieces of furniture pushed back against the pale green walls — three tattered black suitcases.

At the center of everything stood Lillian, tall poker-thin in her baggy print dress, a stalk of quivering energy. Her brown hair had been fashionably coiffed a few days before, but now it hung limp and neglected around her gaunt, pale face. She leaned forward in intense concentration as she barked instructions at Dottie in a voice too deep for her emaciated frame.

Gradually, as if being aroused from a dream, Dottie became aware of an insistent pounding sound. It began softly, then grew in volume until it threatened to drown out the music blaring from the radio. Listening to the clamor, Dottie silently prayed that something had gone wrong with the radio. Then, perhaps, her mother would allow her to stop dancing.

"Look out, Dottie!"

Lillian's shrieked warning reached Dottie at the same instant that her feet collided with the rolled up carpet. She tumbled to the floor without even attempting to break her fall and then lay in a still heap.

"Oh, my God!" Lillian screeched in horror.

Through her haze of exhaustion, Dottie felt herself being scooped up into her mother's thin arms.

"Are you all right, Dottie?" Lillian gasped.

Dottie nodded. "I — I think so," she muttered. "I heard a noise. It made me lose track of what I was doing."

As if on cue, the pounding started again. It shook the entire floor for a few moments, then ceased.

"It's that stupid man in the room below," Lillian said. "If only that idiot realized that you're going to become a star, Dottie."

Lillian gently rocked her daughter back and forth, slipping into the litany that Dottie had heard so many times during the past few months. "Soon you'll be famous, sweetheart. People will forget all about

Shirley Temple once they've had a chance to see Dottie Shepard. You'll be the darling of millions, Dottie, and you won't have to work so hard anymore. You'll never again have to practice in a shabby hotel room like this one. Life is going to be wonderful for us. We'll have all — ”

LILLIAN'S VOICE CROONED ON, BUT DOTTIE NO LONGER listened. She had trained herself to think of other things when her mother started on this topic. Now, memories of her father flowed through the young girl's mind. She wondered how he was getting along, whether or not he missed her. She had last seen him three days ago, but it felt more like weeks. Without Daddy around to calm and soothe her mother's frenzied excitement, time seemed endless.

“Listen to me, Dottie,” Lillian said firmly, shaking her daughter. “You haven't heard a word I've been saying. Now pay attention. This is important.”

Reluctantly, Dottie looked into her mother's face. Lillian was still kneeling on the floor, cradling Dottie in her arms. Dottie wished that she could fall asleep, but Lillian's words came at her like tiny stinging bullets, minute bursts of raw emotion.

“Stand up, Dottie,” Lillian said. “We've got to make sure that you're all right. Come on, stand up. Does it hurt anywhere?”

Dottie rose on wobbly legs, but there was no pain. “I'm okay,” she said.

“Walk,” Lillian commanded.

Slowly, Dottie stepped over to the radio and switched off the music. Then she moved toward the open window. She stopped there and gazed down at the street six stories below. It was crowded with cars, and people hustled along the sidewalk, carrying packages, hurrying to appointments. Three laughing children were skipping past the hotel, expertly dodging the adult pedestrians. Dottie longed to join them.

Behind her, Lillian sighed, “Oh, thank heaven you're all right. This is our chance of a lifetime, Dottie. I couldn't bear the thought of that horrible Larson girl winning because you'd been hurt.”

Dottie remained motionless, staring at the wide granite ledge directly outside the window. She wondered what her mother would do if she were to scramble out the window and stand on the ledge. A smile curled Dottie's lips at the thought of her mother's hysterical reaction.

“It's a good thing I was holding my lucky silver dollar,” Lillian said. “Nothing bad will ever happen to us as long as I've got my good luck piece.”

Dottie peered straight ahead, but she could picture Lillian kneeling on the bare floor beside the rolled up carpet. She would be holding the silver dollar between her thumb and forefinger, rubbing it as if she wanted to erase the eagle from its face.

Dottie leaned forward out the window. She glanced from left to right and saw that the ledge ran the entire length of the hotel in both directions. There was a row of windows about a foot above the ledge, each of them opening into a separate hotel room.

EARLIER IN THE WEEK, TWELVE OF THE ROOMS ON THE sixth floor of the Bradshire Hotel had been occupied by girls who had born a striking resemblance to the box office star of the past two years, seven-year-old Shirley Temple. Each girl had won one of the Shirley Temple look-alike talent contests that had taken place in a dozen California cities. Their prizes had been trips for two to Hollywood and a chance to audition before Howard Sheffsky, a well-known producer. He would then select the most promising to appear in a movie.

On the day after their arrival in the film capital, Mr. Sheffsky, a short, rotund man with a bald head, had watched all of the young contestants perform a song and dance number. Seven of the girls had been eliminated without delay. Further competitions had followed for the others, and three more girls had been sent home. Now, only Dottie and a girl named Connie Larson remained. They were both scheduled to perform for Mr. Sheffsky one last time tomorrow, Thursday, and the producer had promised to announce his final selection soon afterward.

Connie Larson and her mother, Harriet, occupied the hotel room two doors down from Dottie and Lillian's. Connie was seven, two years younger than Dottie, and she was a very talented singer and dancer. Watching her competitor tap across the stage with perfect grace and style, Dottie couldn't understand why Connie wasn't immediately declared the winner.

But Lillian believed otherwise.

"You're cuter than that Larson brat and much more talented," she had said. "You're certain to win, darling. Then the world will be ours. There will be dolls that look like you, Dottie, just like all those Shirley Temple dolls in the toy stores. Won't that be wonderful?"

Dottie had smiled feebly and nodded, but she hadn't felt nearly as confident as her mother. Nor was she certain that she even wanted to win. After only three days away from home, she missed her father

desperately.

Dottie's father, Russ Shepard, was a mechanic in Costa Mesa, California. He was a loving, gentle man who had never been able to fathom his wife's obsessive desire to make their only child a movie star.

One night, two years ago, when her parents believed her to be asleep, Dottie had overheard them arguing.

"Dammit, Lillian, you're not giving Dottie a chance to be a kid," Russ had said in an uncommonly forceful voice. "You're forever making her practice dance steps and singing. Why don't you just leave her alone for a while?"

"You'll never understand, Russ," Lillian replied coldly. "You'd be content to fiddle around with cars for the rest of your life. But I want better things for Dottie. She'll be a star someday."

"When is she going to be a kid?"

"She's above that," Lillian said with finality.

Lying in bed in the darkness, Dottie had murmured, "No, I'm not. I want to be a plain kid. Don't let her make me a star, Daddy. Please, Daddy, please, make her stop."

Lillian's will proved dominant, however, and the interminable practice sessions continued.

THEN, A WEEK BEFORE DOTTIE'S NINTH BIRTHDAY, LILLIAN learned of the Shirley Temple look-alike talent contest to be held in a nearby city. She saw this as Dottie's golden opportunity, and she began to devote herself entirely to preparing the girl for the competition.

By nature, Dottie was short and rather pudgy with a round cherubic face and curly blonde hair. She bore a vague resemblance to the darling of the movies, and now Lillian did everything possible to strengthen the likeness even more. She placed Dottie on a strict diet. She gave her daughter a permanent that left her with exactly fifty-six curls, the same number as Shirley Temple. Lillian encouraged Dottie to smile constantly and often jabbed her finger deep into Dottie's cheek in an effort to deepen her dimple. Whenever they left the house, she pushed Dottie to imitate Shirley Temple's strutting self-confidence and cute mannerisms.

During this time, Dottie grew increasingly confused and unhappy. She couldn't comprehend why her mother was so determined to turn her into an exact duplicate of Shirley Temple, and she resented the

changes in her life. She could have no candy or ice cream. All of her evenings were spent practicing one routine or another. She couldn't even listen to *Tom Mix* or *Little Orphan Annie* on the radio. Instead, Lillian kept the radio in the living room always tuned in to dance music.

When the day of the contest arrived, Dottie delivered a beautiful rendition of *Pennies from Heaven*. Although some of the competitors looked more like the famous moppet, Dottie's singing and dancing far outshone their meager talents. Lillian wept ecstatically as the emcee announced that the judges had unanimously voted Dottie the winner.

A month later, after more frantic rehearsing, Dottie and Lillian boarded a train for Hollywood. From the moment they arrived, Dottie felt as if she were constantly on stage, singing, dancing, and acting. She answered dozens of questions and performed in numerous skits. As the other girls were eliminated, she began to wish that she, too, would be rejected. She felt exhausted from the grueling hours on stage, as well as from the practice that Lillian insisted on when they were alone in their hotel room. Only once did they venture out to sightsee and that was to visit Grauman's Chinese Theater and stand in awe of Shirley Temple's handprints in the cement.

NOW, STARING OUT THE WINDOW OF THE HOTEL ROOM, Dottie struggled to make sense of the past months. Everything was happening so rapidly that she felt off-balance and bewildered. She wanted her daddy very badly. He'd be able to provide some stability to the topsy-turvy world that Lillian had made for them.

"I need something to help me calm down," Lillian said with a nervous laugh. "I'm still shaking, Dottie. The very thought of you breaking a limb makes me feel absolutely faint."

Dottie didn't look away from the window, but she knew that her mother was pouring whiskey into a glass. During the past couple of months, Lillian had started using the whiskey to help her relax. And, since arriving in Hollywood, she seemed to need help relaxing almost constantly. They had been here for only three days, and already Lillian was halfway through her third fifth of liquor.

"There now," Lillian sighed. "That's just what the doctor ordered." She paused, then asked, "Did you see this metal letter opener with the hotel's name imprinted on it, Dottie? I'll have to remember to take it when we leave. It'll be a souvenir of the first time we came to Hollywood."

Dottie made no reply. She would need no souvenir to keep their

hectic stay in Hollywood fresh in her memory.

"Come on, Dottie," Lillian said brightly. "Let's go over those dance steps again. Don't forget that tomorrow is your last chance to impress Mr. Sheffsky with your talent. You've got to give the performance of your life."

Dottie stood at the window as if frozen in that position.

"Did you hear me, Dottie?" Lillian asked crossly. "You've had a rest. Now let's get back to work."

"I don't want to," Dottie said. "I'm tired, and I'm sick of practicing."

"Is that right?" Lillian barked. She stomped across the room, grabbed Dottie's arm, and spun her around. "You listen to me, young lady," she snarled, exhaling whiskey breath into Dottie's face. "We've almost made it. Mr. Sheffsky will choose you as the winner if everything goes right. Don't you dare do anything to louse this up for us."

"I don't care if I win or not," Dottie muttered sulkily.

Lillian slapped her daughter's face. "Well, I care enough for both of us," she yelled. "I've worked as hard as you have to get us here, and I'm not going to let it slip away now. Do you understand me, you ungrateful brat?"

Dottie nodded, swallowing the painful lump in her throat.

Suddenly, Lillian clutched the girl to her chest. "I'm sorry I slapped you, my angel," she moaned. "It's just that I've been under a lot of pressure lately. But you've got to win, Dottie. After making it this far, nothing can stop us. I won't let anything get in the way of our success now."

Gently, Dottie disentangled herself from her mother's embrace. She walked over to the radio and turned the switch. The music of Glenn Miller's band filled the room, and Dottie began to dance.

LATE THAT EVENING, DOTTIE LAY AWAKE IN BED BESIDE HER mother. Lillian tossed and turned restlessly, occasionally groaning in her sleep, but Dottie remained as still as a corpse. Her body felt drained from the long hours of strenuous practice, but sleep refused to come.

The window was open, and a gentle breeze wafted into the room, carrying with it the sounds of traffic and voices from the street below. Dottie listened and tried to ignore the whiskey fumes that flowed with Lillian's labored breath. No matter how hard she tried, Dottie couldn't

understand why it was so important to her mother that she win this contest. She would much rather return to Costa Mesa and be with her father. She had no desire to be as famous as Shirley Temple. She didn't even enjoy dancing anymore. At one time, it had been fun, but those days seemed long past.

With a wistful smile, Dottie recalled the Saturday evenings when she and Daddy would walk up to the ice cream shop on the corner of their street and order huge strawberry sundaes. They'd eat silently, but there was a warm bond between them. Those weekly treats had come to an abrupt end when Lillian decided that Dottie must lose weight. Then, Saturday night became just another practice session.

Lillian's breathing suddenly grew quiet, and she stopped moving. After a moment, she whispered, "Dottie, are you awake?"

Dottie said nothing.

"You're going to win," Lillian said softly. "Then we'll never have to go back to Costa Mesa. There'll be no more washing and cooking and living on an impossible budget. No more dull evenings. No more of your father's clumsy lovemaking. He can stay in Costa Mesa and rot if he wants, but you and I deserve better. And you're going to see that we get it."

Dottie's stomach churned violently, but she gave no indication that she'd heard her mother's words. She waited until Lillian's breathing told her that she had fallen asleep once again. Only then did Dottie begin to cry.

THE FOLLOWING AFTERNOON, DOTTIE SAGGED IN A CHAIR outside of Mr. Sheffsky's office, completely exhausted. She was wearing a frilly, scratchy dress that reminded her of a multi-tiered birthday cake. Lillian sat beside her, rigid with anticipation, and squeezed her daughter's hand tightly. In her other hand, she massaged her good luck silver dollar.

For the past two hours, Dottie and Connie Larson had taken turns performing for Mr. Sheffsky. From the back of the auditorium, Lillian had watched the girls dance, sing, and act out impromptu situations that the producer called out to them. As she fought to control her craving for a drink, she'd rubbed her silver dollar and prayed that Connie would stumble during a dance number or strain her vocal cords while reaching for a high note. But her prayers went unanswered.

Connie performed well, but Dottie also displayed her talents to best

advantage. Her dancing was lovely, and her voice had never sounded better. The only thing that had troubled Lillian was Dottie's lack of expression. The girl's face had appeared somehow vacant, as if her thoughts were miles away.

Finally, Mr. Sheffsky had called a halt to the competition. He'd asked to see first Connie and Mrs. Larson alone in his office, then Dottie and Lillian.

Now, waiting for the producer to finish with the Larsons, Lillian tried to decide whether it was best to have the first or second interview with Mr. Sheffsky. She had hoped that he would quickly tell Mrs. Larson that her daughter had been found lacking and then summon Dottie and her with the news that Dottie had won. But the Larsons had been with Mr. Sheffsky for fifteen minutes. Certainly it wouldn't take that long to dispense with the loser. Unless he was being especially diplomatic and kind. Yes, Lillian decided, that was it. He was letting them down as gently as possible.

When the door to Mr. Sheffsky's office opened at last, Lillian started in her chair and drew in a sharp breath. Connie and her mother marched across the waiting room without a glance toward Dottie and Lillian.

We've won! Lillian thought with a rush of joy.

A red-headed secretary appeared and said, "Mr. Sheffsky will see you now."

Lillian stood up at once, but Dottie slid off of her chair listlessly.

"Look happy," Lillian hissed sharply.

Dottie's lips automatically curled upward, but her eyes remained distant.

THE SECRETARY LED THEM THROUGH HER OFFICE AND opened another door. She stood aside while Dottie and Lillian entered, then softly pulled the door closed behind them.

Mr. Sheffsky was sitting behind a massive desk, smiling broadly. "Have a seat, please," he said, gesturing to the chairs positioned in front of his desk.

When Lillian and Dottie were settled, he said, "You have no idea what a difficult task this has been for me, Mrs. Shepard. Both Connie Larson and your Dottie are extraordinarily talented young ladies, and they both resemble Shirley Temple."

Lillian nodded as her insides writhed with anxiety. God, she wanted a drink.

"To be frank, I still haven't arrived at my final decision," the producer said. "Dottie is a better performer than Connie, though Connie does look a bit more like Shirley Temple. The only thing holding me back from announcing Dottie the winner is her lack of enthusiasm. She speaks in a clear voice, but she seems to have difficulty projecting emotions. Her heart doesn't seem to be in her performances."

"It's the excitement," Lillian said quickly. "Dottie can laugh or cry at the drop of a hat. But these past few days have been very hard on her. The pressure and the uncertainty have taken their toll. If you'll give her a chance, I'm sure that she can be a great actress. She won't let you down, Mr. Sheffsky. I swear it."

The producer leaned back in his chair. "There's a great deal of pressure involved in show business, Mrs. Shepard," he said. "How do you think that Dottie would handle the strain?"

"Just fine," Lillian replied. "She'll get used to it in no time. She'll become a real pro."

"What do you think, Dottie?" Mr. Sheffsky asked.

"I'll get used to it in no time," she said in a flat voice. "I'll become a real pro."

Mr. Sheffsky stared at her quizzically for a moment, then said, "I'll have my final decision for you tomorrow." He jabbed a button on his desk, and the red-headed secretary reappeared. "Show Mrs. Shepard and Dottie out, please."

Rising to her feet, Lillian said, "If you choose Dottie, I promise you that you'll never regret it, Mr. Sheffsky."

"Good-bye, Mrs. Shepard," the producer said and began shuffling papers on his desk.

As they followed the secretary out of the office, Lillian suppressed an urge to strike Dottie. Why the hell hadn't she shown any feeling on stage? At home, Dottie was a bright, animated child. Her face was always radiating emotion. But, now that fame was within their grasp, she had become as unresponsive as a lump of clay.

As soon as they were outside of the studio grounds, Lillian grabbed Dottie's arm and shook the girl fiercely. "Why are you behaving like this?" she demanded. "You never had any trouble acting before, but now you seem determined to ruin this for us."

"I'm sorry, Mama," Dottie whimpered.

"You should be," Lillian snapped. "You're a selfish spoiled brat."

Dottie's eyes filled with tears that began to trickle down her cheeks.

"At least, you're finally showing some feeling," Lillian said. Still squeezing Dottie's arm, she started pulling her down the street toward the hotel. "I'm not going to let you ruin this for us. You've got to win. If Mr. Sheffsky selects that Larson girl, I don't know what I'll do. But that can't happen. It just can't happen."

Lillian released Dottie's arm and quickened her pace. More than anything else, she needed a drink right now.

WHEN THEY ARRIVED BACK AT THE HOTEL ROOM, LILLIAN headed straight for the liquor bottle standing on the bedside table. With trembling hands, she poured an inch of whiskey into a glass and downed it in two gulps.

"We've made it this far," she said, trying to steady her voice. "No one can take the prize away from us now. You're a good actress, Dottie. Why have you been acting so wooden lately? Tell me."

Dottie shrugged and walked over to the window. She gazed beyond the ledge at the street below, longing to return to Costa Mesa. Daddy would understand. Daddy would hold her tenderly in his arms, strong arms and tell her not to worry.

"Connie Larson and her mother are probably celebrating in their room right now," Lillian muttered. "They figure they've got this contest sewn up. But they're wrong. You're going to win."

Daddy would buy me a strawberry sundae with lots of whipped cream, Dottie thought.

"Do you hear me, Dottie?" Lillian asked, then swallowed more whiskey. "That Larson girl isn't going to win."

Daddy would hold me on his lap and read me the funnies. *Flash Gordon* and *Tarzan* and *Dick Tracy*. Then we'd cuddle on the couch and listen to the radio. Not dance music but shows like *Amos 'n' Andy* that would make us laugh.

"You're going to win, Dottie," Lillian shouted. "You're going to be a star. People will start fan clubs for you. And they'll all love me because I'm your mother."

Lillian leapt at her daughter and spun her away from the window. "You're not even listening to me, are you?"

Dottie stared into her mother's glaring eyes. Slowly, Lillian's face began to crumple and tears glimmered in her eyes.

"You've got to win," Lillian moaned, drawing Dottie into a weak embrace. "Oh, baby, you've just got to. If you don't, there's nothing

left for either one of us."

AS EVENING APPROACHED, LILLIAN PACED AND FIDGETED nervously. Several times, she paused long enough to pour herself a drink from the whiskey bottle.

Dottie sat next to the radio with the volume turned very low, listening to Kate Smith. When she closed her eyes, Dottie could almost imagine that she was back in Costa Mesa, secure on her father's lap.

Abruptly, Lillian said, "All right, Dottie, let's practice your acting before you go to bed."

"Not now, Mama, please," Dottie said. "I'm tired."

"How can you even think of sleep now?" Lillian asked harshly. She walked over to the radio and switched it off.

"Okay, now, Dottie, let's pretend that I'm your widowed mother and that I'm about to marry a man you don't like. I've been fooled by his good looks and charm, but you're able to see beneath his front. You know that he's not a nice man. Remember, be cute and sweet. Convince me that I shouldn't marry the guy. And, above all, let some feeling show on your face."

Dottie listened to her mother's slurred instructions and nodded apathetically. She knew from experience that there was no sense in arguing with Lillian when she'd been drinking heavily.

"But Reggie is a fine man," Lillian said dramatically. "He'll make a wonderful husband and daddy."

Dottie glanced toward the window as if it promised freedom. "He's mean," she mumbled.

"Speak up clearly," Lillian said. "Get that pouty tone out of your voice, and speak with emotion."

"He's mean," Dottie repeated. "He'll be a nasty daddy."

"But I love him," Lillian said. "Please give him a chance, darling."

"He's mean," Dottie said again. Then, in a quivering voice, she said, "I don't want to do this, Mama."

Lillian stared at her daughter in rage. "You don't want to do this, do you?" she said. "You'd rather go back to Costa Mesa and rot with your father."

Though she knew it was a mistake, Dottie said, "I miss Daddy. I want to be with him again no matter where he is."

Lillian stood motionless, and, gradually, her pale skin flushed a deep red. "You'll never see him again, Dottie," she said. "Whether you

win or lose, we're not going back to Costa Mesa. We're going to stay right here in Hollywood until you're a star in the movies. Now get in bed and go to sleep. I want you to look alert and rested tomorrow."

Dottie climbed out of the chair and began undressing. A few minutes later, she lay down on the bed and closed her eyes.

But she didn't sleep. The very thought of never seeing Daddy again filled her with an unendurable agony.

I can't let Mama do this, her mind shrieked. Somehow I've got to get back to Daddy before Mama ruins everything. Somehow I've got to stop Mama's craziness. Somehow . . .

On the other side of the room, Lillian switched off the light, grabbed the whiskey bottle, and collapsed onto the chair. In the darkness, she stared toward the window and began to unscrew the cap from the bottle.

DOTTIE AWOKE THE NEXT MORNING FEELING WARM AND damp. She sensed immediately that she'd slept later than usual. She sat up in bed, stretched her arms, and then spied her mother sprawled in the chair. Lillian was sound asleep, snoring softly. Her head slumped sideways onto her shoulder, and her arms dangled over the armrests.

The room was stuffy, and Dottie noticed that the window was closed. She quietly slipped out of bed, crossed the room, and raised the window. She stood there with a half smile on her face as a cool breeze flowed over her.

With a reluctant sigh, she turned from the window and stepped into the bathroom. She washed her face, then spent several minutes brushing her fifty-six curls until they shined. She smiled at herself in the mirror, then put on a startled look. She practiced a variety of expressions until she heard a loud knock on the door.

"I'll get it, Mama," Dottie said, skipping toward the door. She saw that Lillian had awakened and now appeared groggy and confused.

Dottie opened the door. Two policemen in dark uniforms stood in the hallway.

"Good morning, officers," Dottie said, her face reflecting cheerful surprise. "What can I do for you?"

"Is your mother here?" the shorter of the two policemen asked. "We'd like to talk to her."

"She's just getting up," Dottie smiled. "I do hope that no one has

been naughty."

"I'd use a stronger word than *naughty*, honey," the policeman said gently. "A little sweetheart like you shouldn't even have to hear what's happened."

Dottie raised her eyebrows in alarm and pursed her mouth so that her dimple appeared clearly. "Oh, my," she said. "No one was hurt, were they?"

"I'm afraid so," the policeman said.

"What's the trouble?" Lillian asked, shuffling toward the doorway.

"There's been a murder," the taller policeman said bluntly.

"Murder!" Dottie gasped, clamping her fist over her mouth.

"What's that got to do with us?" Lillian asked.

"Connie Larson was stabbed in her hotel room last night," the tall officer said. "Someone snuck into her room during the night and killed her while her mother was asleep right beside her. The weapon was a hotel letter opener."

"Oh, no!" Dottie cried. "Not Connie. She was so sweet and pretty." Tears began to trickle down Dottie's face. She rushed over to Lillian and threw her arms around her. "Oh, Mama, who would ever hurt Connie?"

Lillian stared at the two policemen as her haggard face slowly registered shock. "Connie Larson murdered," she repeated.

"That's right," the short policeman said. "The door to the Larsons' room was locked from the inside. Whoever did it must have crawled along the ledge, then climbed in the open window. The killer left the same way."

Lillian looked toward the open window, then back at the policemen.

"May we see your letter opener?" the short policeman asked. "The hotel manager assured us that there's always one in every room. They expect the guests to take them as souvenirs when they leave."

"It's right here," Lillian said, stepping over to the bedside table. "Where is it? Oh, my God, it's gone. I'm sure that it was right here."

The room was silent as the short policeman held up a round piece of silver. "We found this on the ledge halfway between your room and the Larsons'," he said.

Dottie turned from her mother and studied the object. "That's your good luck silver dollar, Mama," she cried. Sobbing hysterically, Dottie collapsed onto the floor.

Lillian's mouth dropped open, and she shook her head helplessly.

"Would you come along with us," the tall policeman said. It was not a question.

THREE HOURS LATER, DOTTIE SAT PERCHED ON A WOODEN chair in the squad room of the Hollywood Police Station. She was licking a double dip chocolate ice cream cone. Though her red-rimmed eyes threatened to shed a fresh torrent of tears at any moment, she wore a brave, determined expression on her face.

A policeman and a woman social worker stood before her, both of them smiling affectionately. In a few hours' time, Dottie had managed to thoroughly captivate them with her straightforward manner and courageous behavior.

"Is Mama going to have to go to jail?" she asked, curling her lower lip.

"I'm afraid so, darling," the policeman said. "There's going to be a trial, of course, but the whole thing seems pretty cut and dried."

"Even though she did a very bad thing, I still love her," Dottie said, and her face contorted with grief.

"Don't worry, Dottie," the social worker said gently. "You'll be all right. We called your daddy, and he's driving up right now. He should be here pretty soon."

"Connie was so beautiful," Dottie moaned. "How could Mama do such a terrible thing?"

"Hollywood does strange things to people, honey," the social worker said. "Some people will do anything for success. Absolutely anything."

"Has anyone told Mr. Sheffsky yet?" Dottie asked.

The policeman nodded. "He was shocked." He paused, then added, "He was going to announce that you'd won the contest today, Dottie. Of course, the contest is called off now."

"The whiskey made Mama crazy," Dottie said, popping the last of the ice cream cone into her mouth. Then she lowered her face onto her hands and began to weep.

The social worker placed her hand on Dottie's shoulder and glanced at the policeman. Tears shone in both of their eyes.

As her body convulsed with sobs, Dottie wished that her mother could see her now. Lillian would be surprised and delighted at how well her daughter could act.



*Basketball was a tough game. Sometimes it got so dirty
it resulted in murder!*

Playing For Keeps

by HAL CHARLES

TWO YEARS BEFORE THE KILLING, CROSS STEVENS HAD BEEN a very successful high school coach — for one big reason. You see, St. Paul's was a Catholic high in Cincy, and on the scholastic level Catholic schools always have one huge advantage — they can recruit. Well, Stevens became enamoured with Miles Troop the first time he saw the skinny eighth-grader go up for a sky-jam over some high school kids in the Summer Dirt Bowl League. Anyway, the next year the kid's mother was convicted of receiving stolen property. While she was enjoying five to ten courtesy of the state, the coach had taken Troop into his own home. During Troop's four years in the CISL, St. Paul's had gone 119-6 and snatched three state championships. The last two years Stevens' biggest problem was swatting off the college scouts who swarmed round Troop like flies on a bull.

Heaven knows the shielding of promising athletes can be a good thing, what with the college bird-dogs attending practices, slipping cash to players, and generally putting the kind of pressure on high-schoolers that even the blue-chippers can't handle. But rumor was that Stevens had only one rule for recruiting the six-foot, ten-inch, two-hundred-and-thirty-pound center who a scouting service called "the premier aircraft carrier in the country," and it had nothing to do with the number of visitations, the colleges' academic credentials, or even illegal inducements. Stevens had put out a simple message: THE SCHOOL THAT SIGNS ME AS HEAD COACH GETS MILES TROOP IN THE BARGAIN.

Now you've probably never heard of Chandler. It's a small liberal arts institution in northern Kentucky whose new president had decided that the fastest way to put the school's name on everyone's lips was to have a highly rated roundball team. That kind of academic logic goes over big in the Bluegrass State. So, President Galloway came up to St. Paul's shortly after they won their third crown to talk with Stevens. Nobody knows what was said, but late one Saturday night the AP broke the story that Stevens had been hired at Chandler.

At the time I was weekend sports anchor for an independent station in Lexington. Of course I had heard that Stevens had put himself on the block, and like the rest I supposed he had sold out to the highest bidder. Well, I saw my chance for a story, some possible ratings, and maybe a promotion if I did my homework. Besides, I think the Kentucky Constitution forbids in-state sportscasters from talking about anything other than basketball from December through March.

EARLY THAT SUNDAY MORNING I DISCOVERED A FLY IN THE ointment. I drove up I-75 to Cincinnati to get the first interview with the new coach and his player.

"Do you think you can put Chandler on the map," I asked the pajama'd giant who answered Stevens' door.

"Whata you talkin bout?" he said, rubbing his eyes.

"Chandler College just hired your high school coach," I said, standing in the shadows so Bo Byke my cameraman could catch Troop's reaction. "It's common knowledge where he goes, you go."

"Ain't common to me, man," shouted Troop, suddenly awake. "I'm going to a big-name school where I can get on TV a lot."

"That's enough," said a voice behind him. Cross Stevens pulled his horse back inside, and my exclusive was over.

MONDAY MORNING I WAS BACK AT STEVENS' HOUSE TO attend a well-orchestrated press conference. We crowded into his trophy-lined den for the most eagerly awaited announcement since Lady Di's pregnancy. I watched a West Coast coach lose five pounds of sweat. A guy from Carolina smoked enough butts to support the entire tobacco industry. And a smooth-talker from NYC was at a total loss for words.

Troop read slowly. "After much de-lib-er . . . deli-bation . . . thought, I have decided to attend a school that affords me excellent academic opportunities . . . Chandler."

I was louder than the West Virginia coach's sport jacket. "What happened to your desire to be on TV?"

Cross Stevens smiled and answered. "Miles figures that his education comes first."

Not bad for a kid who had gotten through high school on the special education track, I thought.

DURING HIS FRESHMAN YEAR, EVERYBODY'S EYES WERE ON the young Moses, but from a distance. Stevens had this rule that nobody talked to his freshmen because college was hard enough without the extra pressure of the media. Not that anyone had any interest in the constellation of walkons who surrounded Chandler's superstar. Troop rated his first national attention in the prestigious Big Apple Classic, even though playing against two of the top ten made it obvious that the Running Rebels had a long way to go. Miles "Calvary" Troop, as Al dubbed him on one of the NBC telecasts, was magnificent, whether dribbling the length of the court at speeds reserved for Bonneville, soaring in for a windmill jam, or swatting away an opponent's shot like a young Bill Russell. By Christmas the nation's appetite had been whetted, but Stevens' rule kept them on a starvation diet.

I suppose I came closer to a real interview than anyone. Chandler was playing Eastern Kentucky over at Richmond. I hadn't seen such homecooking since my Daddy umped one of my Little League games. Well, with 15:41 left in the first half Troop had retired to the pines with his third foul. When the second half started, he looked like a frustrated kid. Everytime he hit the boards he was tentative. Elbows and arms smacked his sweaty body. Stevens was livid, hurling insults like spears at the whistling zebras.

Finally Troop came down with a bound wearing an Eastern player for a cape. When no foul was called, he spat out something to the nearest ref. Sure enough, T-time. Troop just stared in disbelief as an Eastern player marched to the foul line to shoot the technical. Then the kid did something that hushed the howling crowd. Instead of handing the ball to the impatient referee, Troop walked slowly to midcourt, and cradling the ball like a baby sat down.

Well, the ref gave him another T. Still Troop sat as silent as if he was going to break into a lullaby. Another T. Ejection. But he refused to leave. For over five minutes, despite a jeering crowd, he just sat there, his eyes kind of blank. Finally Stevens came out to him, knelt down, and said something. The coach then led him over to the sidelines like a chastised kid and sat him on the end of the bench.

Now I just happened to have been assigned the last seat on press row, which was next to Troop. The crowd quickly got into what was becoming a romp, and I turned to the sullen watcher.

"It's always tough on the road," I said philosophically.

Troop mouthed a single obscenity.

"Take it easy," I suggested. "You'll learn to handle this kind of problem."

The kid stared at me like I was nuts or something.

"Problems," he said. "Don't have no problems. Ain't had no problems since I started playing ball. All my problems go straight through that net and disappear."

With that he turned quickly and stared blankly at the court.

BY ITS SECOND YEAR THE MILES TROOP SHOW HAD GONE from second-rate to Broadway. Stevens surrounded his star with a supporting cast of Jucos and transfers. One commentator began referring to the team as "the Running Outlaws," while a national publication labelled them "the best that money can buy." Naturally Stevens scoffed at the rumors of recruiting violations that began to surface, but one thing was certain — Troop was indeed what *The Sporting News* called "a real Kentucky thoroughbred."

When our 5:30 sports anchor Brad Phillips moved up to a network affiliate in Chicago, I got the sports desk by default. Instead of merely reporting scores, I tried ABC's "Up Close and Personal" approach, emphasizing the person who was putting points on the board. Of course I followed Chandler everywhere in hopes of finding a niche in Stevens' stone wall, but assistant coaches, teammates, even the ball

boys all conspired in silence.

One thing came through loud and clear that year. I'd played enough ball on the playgrounds and in high school to know the game, and even though Troop had the big numbers — 27 and 13 — something was missing from his game. Stevens must have noticed it too. Every second of every game he was on his star's back, yelling at him, jerking his jersey a la Bobby Knight, and slapping his leg with a rolled-up program like that Crum in Louisville. Nothing Troop did was enough.

One night in December when the Rebels had doubled the score on a Division II school from Indiana, I gained a new insight. By the time the second half started, the tall center had lost interest. And this wasn't the first time. So "Killer" Stevens, as press row had dubbed him, yanked the kid and began a real tongue-lashing.

While I was watching this, my eye caught the pock-marked face of a huge man. Built like a weightlifter, he was sitting seven or eight rows behind Chandler's bench. Maybe it was that he was the only one in the stands not watching the slaughter or maybe it was something familiar about him, but I couldn't put my finger on it. Anyway, unlike the other spectators whose eyes were filled with fire and blood, his had a red-lined melancholy.

Troop, after having done his penance, returned to the game. Like a fanatic. The kid was hyper. He stole a pass on the press. Whether shooting or cleaning the boards, he seemed to hang in the air like he had personally repealed the law of gravity. He was everywhere, and in a five-minute span he did everything in the gym but sell popcorn.

That's when it happened. Stealing the ball at midcourt, Troop broke clean. In a futile attempt to head him off, the Hoosier's lilliputian guard got tangled in the giant's legs. Troop went down like a felled tree. Nobody said a word. The kid went over to help the center, but Troop picked himself up and began to wave his finger in the kid's face. He was scolding him. Then Troop lifted the guard and began to shake him the way my father's beagle used to shake rabbits when we went hunting together. Just as Troop started to hoist the kid over his shoulders, Stevens rushed up and restrained him. Slowly Troop put the kid down and headed for the showers.

I don't know why, but on the way out I siddled up beside the huge wrestling type I'd spotted earlier.

"Kid's got quite a temper," I said.

Silence.

"You seemed more interested in him than the game," I tried again.

"Knowed him when he was younger," answered the behemoth in a scowl that ended our conversation. I wanted to write him off as just another playground hustler, one of those hangers-on you find in any athlete's wake, but I couldn't get those eyes of his out of my mind.

AFTER CHANDLER HAD WON TWO TOURNAMENTS DURING the holiday break, Troop had gone from a dark-horse candidate to the odds-on favorite to be the first sophomore since Bill Walton to be named Player-of-the-Year. NBC rearranged their schedule to put the Rebels on TV twice. Always in the background, though, were the whispers of a full-scale NCAA investigation. Couple that with the rows of NBA scouts and agents in the stands, and you can see why the smart money said Troop would declare hardship for the NBA Draft at the end of the season.

The more famous Troop became, the more the public wanted to know, and the higher Stevens' wall around him grew. *Sports Illustrated* had to use a game shot of Troop for their cover because the coach wouldn't allow the photog to pose him. Even Cosell had the door slammed in his face. Now I could understand Stevens' reluctance to allow a naive freshman to deal with the press, but Miles Troop had almost two years of a college education under his belt. In fact, Stevens' cloistering of his star became more intriguing to me than the ballplayer himself. Why?

So I went for it. Since the NCAA publicity mill always describes college ballplayers not as mercenaries — which they are of course — but as "student athletes," I decided my best tact might be to approach Troop from the student angle. Now the kid had been in special ed in high school, so it seemed logical that he was getting some tutorial aid at Chandler. Sure enough I found the remedial division in the school's directory under the current academic euphemism Developmental Learning Center.

Somehow the DLC, as they called it, got the impression I was the station's education reporter profiling Chandler's approach to the "socio-economically and academically disadvantaged students." Ms. Plummer, the director, gave me the 50¢ tour of the facility, pointing out every detail from the computer terminals to the student tutors. Then we retired to her office.

"Let me play the devil's advocate," I said diabolically. "This all looks good, but how do you respond to the charge that your department is an elaborate charade whose only real purpose is to nursemaid dumb

jocks?"

Her eyebrows lowered to a defensive posture, suggesting this wasn't the first time she'd heard the question. "Nothing could be further from the truth, Mr. Katt. Our mission is to serve the entire student body."

"You mean you don't aid athletes here?"

"Well . . ."

"Take for instance, that big basketball center, what's-his-name?"

"Oh, Miles. He's one of our most diligent students."

"In what? Remedial basketweaving?"

She fished through some papers and held up a few. "In the three years I have been at Chandler, no student has made more improvement than Miles Troop. I've never seen someone so driven to read. When he first came to me, he had trouble reading *Dick and Jane Go to the Fair*. Now, believe it or not, he carries around J.D. Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye* like it was his playbook. And I wish you could be here every Tuesday morning when he comes in to talk to me about it. He's like a little kid with a new toy."

After Ms. Plummer loaded me down with academic propaganda, I left the Center wondering if Chandler had enrolled two Miles Troops.

THE NEXT DAY I DROVE DOWN TO THE CORRECTIONAL INSTITUTE in Clement County. The thin woman was sitting in the prison library reading by a wisp of light that escaped through the dirty venetian blinds. In her thirties, she had the pained look that in another time and place would have been found on a blues singer in a Parisian cabaret. I wasn't sure what I was looking for, but now I was determined to find out everything I could about Miles.

"Here I am just about ready to get out on probation, and you're the first visitor I've had, Mr. Katt."

"Doesn't Miles come to see you?"

"That Stevens man got him convinced that no good can come of seeing his mama in jail."

"You don't seem to care too much for his coach."

"Why should I? He stole my son from me."

"Stole?"

"That's right, and he's not the first man after my Miles."

"I'm not sure I understand."

"Miles has always been a sensitive boy. I knew from the moment he was born he could have been an artist, an architect, anything he wanted to be. But his daddy said sports was the easy way to the top. So instead of those beautiful fingers tapping piano keys, his daddy had

him a bouncing a ball. There're still nail holes on the side of the house where his daddy would raise his basket as he grew."

I flipped through my note pad containing all the background the station's morgue had on the kid. "I'm sorry, Mrs. Troop, but I don't recall anything about his father."

"Course you don't. Man up and left when Miles was nine. Boy got rheumatic fever. Man thought his son was gonna die and he couldn't make himself stay around and watch. Let me tell you," she gestured with pencil-thin arms, "I nursed that boy, night and day, back to health. Then for three years he didn't touch one of those damned basketballs. We listened to music, went to the zoo, the museum. You know, I only had one child in life on purpose so I could raise him right. Anyway, I thought everything was going fine till one day I heard rattling on the side of the house. There was Miles shooting baskets. He said the kids were making fun of him. It's just not fair. If you're five-foot-four and don't like sports, you're just a bookworm, but if you're six-foot-four like Miles was, you're called a sissy."

"Is that when Stevens came into the picture?"

"Yeah, he started hanging round the playground, stopping by and filling Miles' head with the things basketball could get him. Well, I didn't like the crowd he was running with, the way he started sassing me, the things he wanted, so one day I put my foot down — no more basketball. Well, Mr. Stevens didn't like that a bit and told me so."

"How did Miles end up playing ball?"

"Just about that time the police found a whole lot of stolen stereo equipment in his room. Now, I ain't never told anybody this before, but I had a choice to make. So I told them I'd taken the stuff — couldn't let my prize son go to jail."

One thing was for sure — I had never expected to find such a sensitive, proud woman in Miles' background.

"And wouldn't you know," she continued, "no sooner had the judge sent me down here than Stevens steps in and offers to let poor Miles come to live with his family. Course he didn't mention to the court how it would also allow him to keep my boy playing basketball and write Mr. Stevens a four-year winning ticket — maybe more."

I left the institute with my estimate of Cross Stevens fallen lower than before — if that were possible.

THE TALL BLOND USHERED ME INTO THE WALNUT-PANELED office. The walls were covered with pictures of Rupp, Wooden, and a lot of other great coaches. I was sure whose picture was going up on

the wall next. I figured Stevens might not let me interview his star, but he was always ready to talk himself. I stood there almost up to my knees in carpet as Stevens, on the phone, motioned for me to sit down.

"Tempting offer, Donnie. I'll get back to you by the end of the week." He hung up. "What can I do for you, Katt?"

"I was down in the Clement County CI talking with Miles Troop's mother. She raised some interesting questions."

Just then the team manager stuck his head in the door. "Coach, practice is ready to start and the baskets are still up. You got the key?"

"Do I look like the janitor, Sutton?" he barked. "You know I don't fool with that kind of stuff."

Sutton backed out apologetically. Stevens looked at his watch. "It's later than I thought, Katt. Catch me another time, huh?"

End of interview.

I WAS SPENDING SO MUCH TIME ON CHANDLER'S CAMPUS I felt like asking for college credit. Tuesday morning I camped outside the DLC with the paperback I had bought at the campus bookstore. About 11:00 the door flew open and out sauntered Miles in a red cap, sweatshirt, and jeans. Up close he looked even taller. Reading as he walked, a smile formed on the corners of his mouth, and he seemed oblivious to anything other than Holden Caulfield's world.

"Better watch where you're going," I said. "You're liable to fall off the curb."

"Huh," he said, stopping.

I held up my copy of *Catcher in the Rye*. "You know like Holden's always worrying about?"

"You like the book too?"

"Yeah, I've always felt sorry for such a misunderstood kid."

He looked down at me. The face betrayed no hint of the sulk that haunted it while he was on the court. "It's my third time through, and I still can't figure out why a good guy ends up in the nut house. I mean, he doesn't deserve it."

We wound our way through the crisp February air talking about the phonies of the world, his favorite classes, an offer he'd gotten for a bit role in a campus play — everything but basketball. I saw a side of Miles his mother would have been proud of. It didn't occur to me till later I had forgotten to turn my tape recorder on.

"I guess that learning center's pretty helpful," I said.

"Yeah, I didn't care too much for studying in high school. If the coach hadn't helped me with my grades . . . I mean, my classes, I'd

never be here."

We were starting down the stairs to the grill when I heard a familiar shout. "Katt, how many times do I have to tell you my ballplayers are off-limits? And Miles, haven't I warned you about these media types?"

The kid looked genuinely surprised. "Gee, Coach, we were just talking about classes and stuff."

"That's the way they hook you, you jerk. Then they get you to say things about yourself and the team, things they can twist." He shook his fist in the air. "Now get your butt over to the weightlifting room, or that big center from Tech isn't going to be the only one shoving you around."

Miles stared at me with the innocence of a kid who's just been told there's no Santa Claus. What could I say? I felt like a Judas. His head drooped and he walked away.

I SPENT THE DAY OF THE TECH GAME TRYING TO TRACK down rampant rumors. I called an old friend in Kansas City who had a source in the NCAA. Sure enough, Chandler was about to join the UCLA's and Wichita States on probation for countless recruiting violations.

It wasn't until the second half that the whole scenario started to take shape in my mind. I arrived at the game a little early with the hardcore fans who like to watch the teams go through warm-up drills. I nodded to the scar-faced weightlifter who was in his familiar position, and then, perhaps because there were so few spectators, a "suit" caught my eye. With a three-piece tailored Brooks Brothers, he stood out from the gym-rats. I had seen his face somewhere — papers, TV, a press guide — but I couldn't quite place him.

A third figure concerned me more. While his teammates shot layups, Miles sat at the end of the bench, staring defiantly at Stevens, who was overseeing the drills. When the game started, it was obvious that, as the coaches say, Miles hadn't come to play. He was late getting down court and wouldn't shoot the ball. On defense he played matador style, waving as Tech's pudgy center went by him for easy layups.

Finally, Stevens, who had spent most of the first half glancing up into the stands, had had enough. Calling a timeout, he jerked Miles out of the game, and while the cheerleaders led the students in a little "stand up and holler," the coach pulled his center aside to do a little shouting of his own. From my choice seat at the end of the press table, I picked up bits and pieces of what he was saying.

"... embarrassing me . . . jeopardizing our future . . . I'm warning you . . . big bucks . . . promises have been made . . .

Then it hit me. I wheeled around. The suit in the stands was Donald Farmer, the General Manager of the NBA's expansion team, the cellar-dwellers whose pitiful play had guaranteed them a lock on the first pick in the upcoming draft. The Donnie on the telephone. Of course, just as he had used Miles as his ticket to college coaching, Stevens must have been planning to escape Chandler and the inevitable sanctions by taking the coaching job in the pros. If I didn't miss my guess, the position was his if he could guarantee that his talented sophomore center would declare hardship for the draft. Sure, hadn't the Celtics lost Ralph Sampson because they couldn't pry him loose from Virginia? But Stevens had a problem — his star was unwilling to perform.

THE BIG NEWS THE NEXT DAY WASN'T THAT TOP-TWENTY
Chandler had been upset by unranked Indiana Tech. It wasn't even that Miles Troop had spent the entire second half on the bench unemotionally staring straight ahead. When the janitor had opened the gym the next morning to start cleaning up, he found Cross Stevens dangling from one of the goals, the rope of the torn net twisted grotesquely around his neck.

The police, having found an overturned stepladder below, decided that the coach had been repairing the basket, slipped, and got tangled in the net. If I hadn't heard Stevens express his refusal to do janitorial work to the team manager that day, I could have swallowed the official verdict of no foul play more easily. President Galloway cancelled the Rebels' remaining games. Since Chandler still had a good shot at being in the NCAA tournament, everybody wondered why an assistant coach hadn't taken over. Part of the problem I discovered was the disappearance of Miles Troop. Nobody on campus knew or would say what had happened to him.

About a week later I was editing some videotape of the Cincinnati Reds' spring training when I was interrupted by the appearance of a hulking man, his eyes still red-lined.

"Come on," he said. "There's something I want to show you."

WE TOOK I-64 TOWARD LOUISVILLE. JUST AFTER CROSSING
the Kentucky River, he had me take the exit and drive south for a few miles. We pulled through a gate and wound up a gravel road. In a grove of trees I saw a white-columned, antebellum mansion that looked

out of time. We stopped in front. Without saying a word, my host picked up a stack of books from a brown bag and motioned for me to follow him.

Behind the house we found a group of kids with some guys who were dressed like hospital orderlies. A towhead who looked about nine was swinging while a little girl was climbing a jungle gym. Several kids were sitting motionless, seemingly unaware of anything around them.

One figure stood out. A smile on his face the size of the sunrise, he reached out with his long arms and lifted some of the smaller boys up on the slide.

"Boy's happy now," said my huge companion. "Finally getting to be what I never let him be."

I should have spotted the family resemblance long ago.

"The night of the Tech Game," he continued, "I waited round to talk with Miles. It was past time I told him who I was. For two years I've been coming to his games trying to work up the courage. I went back to the locker room, and there I heard Miles and Stevens' voices arguing in the dark gym. Stevens was mad as hell, yelling about how he'd fixed Miles' poor grades so he could come to college, how Miles owed him."

Sure. That was what Miles meant that day outside the grill when he had let slip that Stevens had helped him with his grades.

"Now the coach wanted Miles to quit school, to turn pro. Miles refused. He liked school and what it had done for him. So just as I peered in, Stevens grabs Miles' shirt and says, 'Listen, you overgrown moron, your mama got in my way and I took care of her. You play along with me, or else.' "

My companion's eyes were as clear as the March morning as he finished. "Before I could get to the boy, he grabbed Stevens . . ." He lowered his head, then raised it. "Now you do what you want, but me, I got to make up a lot of time with my boy."

As I watched the two of them in the warm sun, I thought of my childhood, my relationship with my father, the kind that Miles had never had and what it had done to him. I hoped that Miles wouldn't have to suffer like Holden Caulfield, that the help he would get here would teach him to cope.

I walked slowly back to the car. The words Miles had used that night at the ballgame to describe how he handled all his problems burned into my mind. It was a hell of a story, one that had taken two years to piece together, but one that would never make the air.



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It was their anniversary, and she deserved something nice — but not as nice as the present he had: his lovely, willing secretary!

Something Nice For Julia

by JERRY JACOBSON

THE SLEEK, WHITE LOTUS EUROPA SHOT THROUGH THE canopy of overhanging trees like a bullet ablaze. With afternoon fading, the low sun flashed arrows of light between branches and limbs. Locke reached a gloved hand into the glove box without taking his eyes from the roadway, found his sunglasses and donned them deftly. A roadway warning sign flashed up, the black-and-yellow configuration looking a bit like a snake having a fit: a sharp turn to the left and a sudden dip. Locke geared the Lotus down with the expertise of an Italian roadracer, a portrait of a man in complete control of his machine and his life.

He had stumbled upon the Two Willows Restaurant almost by accident. He had been shaking down the Lotus the week he had taken delivery on it, not paying much attention where he was driving, but just challenging the Lotus with a variety of terrain. After miles of blacktop had been left behind he suddenly found himself in the interior of the state, with its chicken farms and dense forests and roadside mailboxes struck miles apart. The old roadhouse restaurant appeared as something of an anomaly, as though it were some recent concoction of a crazed pop artist determined to shoe-horn a little civilization into the midst of a wilderness.

Instead, it was a living, breathing, operating restaurant and cocktail lounge, with two massive, ancient willow trees shading its entrance. The dining room floor was durable maple where once flappers danced and did the jitterbug to the tunes of a 30's dance band, while gangsters sat in the corners in secret enclaves, plotting rubouts and brewery takeovers. The end of Prohibition ended those turbulent days and now the roadhouse was merely a rustic bit of nouveau elegance for the local carriage trade, a watering hole for real estate salesmen and bored, upper middle-class housewives wilted from three sets of tennis and looking for a pick-me-up, perhaps in more ways than one. Locke wasted no time telling Crystal Andreason they had a new place to meet.

Ten minutes later, Locke was pulling into the gravel parking lot. Her silver Porsche was already there and it continued to excite him sexually that she was already early and eager for their meetings.

LOCKE HAD MET CRYSTAL ANDREASON THE YEAR BEFORE. They both had offices on the same floor of a mid-town office building of glass and steel. Locke owned Executive Images-Inc., which dealt with executive dress and stress, concepts and strategies for winning in the world of business, job search services and dozens of other consulting skills. They bumped elbows in a copying service. Locke told her the blue pinstripe suit she was wearing made her a bit overdressed for a secretary. She thanked him coolly for the suggestion. He waved her off with a smile, told her that was his occupation and gave her a business card.

The next afternoon, Locke's own secretary delivered a white business envelope hand-addressed to him. Inside he found *her* business card, lettered *The Andreason Agency — Professional Athletes' Representative*, with a handwritten note on the reverse, which said,

"Thanks for the suggestion concerning business dress, but I think I'll stick to suits. My clients simply wouldn't stand for an unbusinesslike look." Crystal Andreason.

Their subsequent affair was as inevitable as mail in a mail chute adhering to the principal of gravity. She was not married and not overly involved with any particular male; his marriage was faltering and beginning to drag on like a load far too heavy for its bearer. After four years of marriage, Julia's personality was beginning to develop all the signs of spousal stagnation: jealousy, spitefulness, paranoia, alternating periods of sexual indifference and sexual selfishness. The litany of her emerging psychological ailments was beginning to grow too long to list or remember.

From the very start, Crystal made him forget most of that. She was open, honest, understanding, witty and fearlessly imaginative in bed. In the face of a marriage that had soured so quickly, it seemed that now his blessings were coming in bunches. She didn't even mind the constant changing of their places of rendezvous and bedding down. "I understand, darling," she had once told him, "that the moving target is less despoiled."

THE MASSIVE RESTAURANT WAS ONLY SPARSELY PEOPLED. Locke passed it and walked into the dusk-lit lounge. Crystal waited for him at a table near the rear, looking trim and elegant in another of the array of business suits of which she seemed to never run out or repeat, this one cocoa brown. The windows looked out on a duck pond and a short fall of water and a narrow stream whose mouth was clearly anyone's guess, including the near-distant Atlantic.

As Locke sat down across from her, he saw the dark eyes flash in a kind of sensual lighting up. They both knew what afternoon delights lay ahead.

"I've ordered champagne," she told him. "We're celebrating. For two reasons. I just stole a tennis pro right out from under her agent's nose and I'm in an animal way."

Locke took her hand across the table and gave it a firm squeeze. "Well, then," he told her, "when the wine arrives we'll drink to animalism. Who's the tennis player you're guilty of thieving?"

"Mimzi Clarke, the new muppet Tracy Austin. She won the National Juniors three years in a row, Girls' sixteen-and-under twice and Girls' eighteen-and-under the week after her eighteenth birthday. Her agent wasn't getting her product endorsement One, just shuttled her off to

one tournament after another like she was a one-cow cattle drive and he was the drover. Also, he didn't have a law degree, which meant he read a contract like Daffy Duck reading the blueprints for a Titan missile. So you can see, she wasn't all that difficult to steal."

Through their champagne, Crystal Andreason continued being the attentive lover and perfect diplomat. When she brought up the subject of Locke's wife — as she did only rarely — it was always in relationship to some incidental matter that did not bear directly upon their faltering marriage. If she felt the victor in this *jouer de trois*, she was suppressing any desire to gloat or berate the vanquished.

She spoke of that marriage now, in the idle way of someone inquiring about baseball scores or bank interests.

"Did your wife ever decide on what to buy with your anniversary gift?"

"Julia hasn't mentioned a thing about it," Locke answered as their after-lunch coffee arrived. "As far as I know, it's still a boxful of money."

He had long ago admitted to himself he wasn't one to show much imagination when it came to buying gifts. For years he'd bought neckties for his father's birthday, not recognizing that as a foundry worker, his father had little use for them. The only time he'd ever seen his father wearing one was, in fact, in his coffin.

Locke's fifth wedding anniversary had come up four months earlier. Tradition bespoke a gift of wood was appropriate. But he'd dallied and procrastinated and at the last moment bought a small teakwood box in an Oriental specialty store and placed inside it five one-hundred-dollar bills. At her disappointment that the money had been a thoughtless, last-minute gift, Locke had simply told her to be grateful that it wasn't a necktie, and to use the money to get something nice for herself. For weeks afterward, Locke had periodically checked only to find the bills still mint-new and still there. He knew she was spiting him, her petty way of telling Locke that a fistful of cash was not a true expression of love, but something more like a payoff. He hadn't checked the box in several weeks now, but he had no doubts his anniversary gift was still there.

The waitress came and brought Locke up out of his reverie by asking if there would be anything else. Miraculously, they had been chatting and wooing for over forty-five minutes. The champagne was gone. Locke returned the check to the waitress with a twenty-dollar bill and waved off the change.

OUTSIDE, THE AFTERNOON SUN HAD SLIPPED WELL BELOW the tops of the trees, plunging the area into premature dusk. Crystal had her arm snaked around his waist, one finger slipped through a belt loop. He could feel the warmth of her forearm through his suit coat and shirt. Instinctively, as an act of self-preservation, Locke scanned all the cars in the lot for one he had seen in some other place, at some other time. Being followed and being found out was the curse all men bore who cheated on their wives. Julia once confessed to him early in their marriage how she had suspected she was not his first choice as a mate, that he had married her on the rebound from an unrequited love, or for spite or revenge, or merely as an acquisition or to stave off loneliness. If he had married her for the wrong reasons, well, she said, she could live with that. But what she would never abide was the sharing of his affection with another woman. Were that to happen, she told him, she could never be sure to what dark depths her humiliation and rage might go.

Reminded now of these unspoken capabilities in her, Locke noted each automobile carefully, one by one. His apprehension faded. The only cars that were familiar to him were the silver Porsche and his own Lotus.

Crystal Andreason was still clinging to his waist, her palm slipped down to the top of his buttocks, a gesture that seemed to Locke both one of intimacy and possession.

"One of these days I'm going to let a psychiatrist delve to the bottom of my need to consort only with married men," she said, patting his backside for emphasis. "Is it the risk I love? The reconnoitering? The subconscious need to humiliate the wife? Or myself? I can't recall having a single male in years. Did you find our bed of desires, lover?"

"It's a place called the Old Mill Inn," Locke told her. "About six miles down the highway. Quaint, continental and quiet."

"With a proprietor who doesn't ask questions," Crystal Andreason said. "It sounds perfect. But do drive with all due dispatch as I follow, darling. I'm horny as all get out."

AT NINE P.M., LOCKE STOPPED AT A ROADSIDE PHONE BOOTH and called his wife. There had been some foul-ups in arranging some seminars, he told her, and as crazy as it sounded, he hadn't been able to get to a phone. Her tone was filled with the familiar resignation, all the fight drained from it, like a boxer, beaten and beleaguered and

no longer eager to rise to his feet to put up a battle. Did he want dinner? No, he told her, he'd already grabbed a sandwich in town. Was a sandwich really enough? She could fix him something. It was no trouble. No, no. He was dogged-tired and food was the farthest thing from his mind. He just wanted to get home and get some sleep.

He put up the phone, left the booth and climbed back into his car. He felt an odd chill in the air. The sky was black and starless, a curious turn of weather for so deep in the summer. He pulled the Lotus back onto the highway and settled in for the twenty-minute drive home. Fat raindrops began to splatter against the windshield and dance off the finely waxed hood. He drove through the unnatural rural darkness feeling a little claustrophobic and barely inching along, even though the odometer's needle had nudged past the eighty-five k.p.h. mark. He looked for some break in the storm down the horizon, but it was as though some malevolent hand had pulled a massive dark shroud down over the whole dome of the sky.

When he reached the city, Locke found the gloomy deluge had spread there too. The downtown streets were virtually barren in the downpour. The few cars Locke saw moved slowly through the rain, their headlights seeming to be searching the pavement for something they'd lost.

LOCKE'S TWO-STORY BROWNSTONE WAS LOCATED ON A HILL on the northern rim of the business district. Its ground floor was dark when Locke pulled in at the curb, but lights were burning on the second floor. He checked his face in the rear view mirror and saw a light smudge of lipstick on one of his front teeth. He moistened two of his fingers and rubbed it away, disdaining his handkerchief. Marital misfortune turned upon such a slender error as this. As he sprinted from the car to the brownstone's porch, he thought he'd glimpsed the figure of a woman looking down to the street from the second floor bedroom window.

He double-locked the door behind him and went upstairs. His bones ached with tiredness and the climb left him utterly exhausted. Extramarital affairs, he'd come to conclude, were better left to younger men, whose bodies were newer and more resilient. The constant physical movement, the tension and fear of being caught, the frenetic bouts of sex themselves, all these were draining him before his time.

Julia was in the bathroom. Locke paused at the top of the stairs to see if he could identify the Broadway show tune she was humming

above the noise of the running shower. He couldn't.

He continued down the upstairs hallway to the master bedroom, bathed in the half-light of twin bedside lamps. The bedcovers were turned neatly down on both sides.

Locke undressed slowly. His suit coat and trousers were damp from his short jaunt in the rain and he draped them on separate chairs to dry. As he searched for fresh pajamas in the bureau, the small, wooden box caught his eye and idly he opened it. The money was gone. And its absence dealt him a mild shock. He'd become so accustomed to lifting the box's lid and seeing the bills there untouched that he never really anticipated any change, that indeed the box and the money would remain one down through the centuries, a family heirloom whose meaning and mystery would elude all the succeeding generations of Lockes.

But now, all that had changed. By removing the money, Julia was telling him that not buying her an anniversary gift was no longer a point of serious contention, that she had reacted in a foolish and petulant way. She had come to recognize that the gift was not as important as the act of giving. Smugly satisfied, Locke smiled to himself as he pulled on the pajama bottoms.

He was in bed getting comfortably settled with a very good thriller he had been reading when he heard the shower water cease its running. Through the open bedroom door he could hear his wife's mindless humming grow louder as she, too, opened a door, to allow steam to escape from the bathroom so she could comb out her hair in an unclouded mirror.

LOCKE CONTINUED READING, ADMIRING THE MANNER IN which this particular author could deftly turn the plot's movement from one in which the book's hero had absolute control over events to one in which it was neutralized and confounded by chaos and danger. Locke would remember this author's name and would most certainly buy his next novel.

"Gordon?" he heard his wife call out to him from the bathroom.

"Yes, love?" Locke called back.

"Are you home?"

"Well, of course I'm home," he yelled in reply. "The sound of my voice should tell you that."

"How did all of that seminar business go?" she said. "Well, I hope."

"We got it all bedded down very nicely," he told her, a little pleased with himself at that double entendre tossed off so carelessly without fear that it would be deciphered.

"I'm glad," Julia called back. She seemed to be in a gay mood, very light-hearted and amiable. "Were you caught in the storm driving back? What a freak thing. I mean, it came up so suddenly."

"Yes, I was driving when it hit. Nearly blew me from the road a couple of times. Nasty."

"Umn."

Locke turned a fresh page in the book and thought about the empty box on the bureau. "Darling, I notice the money is gone."

"The money?" his wife called back. "What money is that?"

"The money in the wooden box," Locke answered. "For your anniversary gift. Did you finally break down and go out and buy something nice for yourself as I suggested?"

"Yes, darling, as a matter of fact I did."

"And are you pleased with what you bought?" Locke asked.

There fell a pause in their dialogue as though true to the changeable nature of the female, his wife was now having second thoughts about her purchase. But then, she answered, "Yes, I am pleased, actually, with what I bought. All in all, I think I couldn't have made a better choice."

"Atta girl," Locke said and dipped back into his book. He finished the page and turned it, approaching the final portions of the last chapter, the end well in sight but the shocking, twisting denouement still obscured. Julia appeared to be coming to bed. She'd switched off the bathroom light and turned on the one in the hallway. Locke noticed that a part of her shadow had fallen into the room and onto the carpet.

"Are you in bed?" she said to him now in a normal tone, so much nearer was she to the bedroom now.

"Yes," Locke said, somewhat absently, as he sensed the climax of the novel about to unfold. "In bed."

"Are you reading?"

"Reading, yes." And then Locke added, without glancing up, "What did you buy for yourself, darling?"

"A private detective and a pistol, darling," she said, as she came all of a sudden into the room.



As she walked to her car, the parking lot was in darkness. A figure loomed behind her. A razor glinted in the moonlight!

The Slasher

by MEL WASHBURN

IT WAS LATE IN THE AFTERNOON, AND THE SQUAD ROOM OF Southside Homicide was almost deserted. A couple of detainees sat disconsolately in the holding cells, waiting for the wagon to take them to the central lockup; a few detectives still sat at their desks, muttering into their phones or two-finger typing their reports; and at a broad table next to the large, grimy windows at the end of the room, Cynthia Frost sat trying to read old arrest records as the strong rays of the evening sun bore down heavily on the tabletop, turning the yellowing sheets of paper a lurid pink.

She leaned back for a moment, staring up at the ceiling and massaging her temples: it had been a long, hard day. "Oh, Detective Frost!" a mellow baritone voice called out from across the large, dusty squad room. "Come in here for a moment, will you?"

"Yes, sir, of course." Cynthia shrugged off her weariness and, striding across the room, entered Captain Rooney's private office. "Take a chair," he said, and as she did so, he closed the door and sat down behind his desk. "Can you spare me a half hour or so? I won't be keeping you from a date with a young man or something, will I?"

Cynthia smiled shyly. "No, sir. No young man." She was an

attractive young woman, slightly shorter than average, with delicate features and fine blonde hair. She was, so far as she knew, a normal young woman in every way, but at the present time in her life she wasn't much interested in young men. The challenges of her job and her determination, as the first female officer ever assigned to homicide, to prove her competence took up all her energy. "I'm completely at your disposal."

Rooney smiled warmly. "I'm glad. You have a good mind, Frost. Maybe the best mind in the squad."

"Thank you."

"No thanks necessary. I only speak the truth. You probably know that when you first came on the squad, some of the men had their doubts. One in particular suggested that I assign you to closing out old cases, ones that had never been solved and never would be. He said that would be an easy, safe job: just the thing for a woman."

"I can imagine who that man was." It had been Sergeant Harry Brown, she was certain. Ever since she'd joined the squad, he'd made it his business to "look out for her." He was forever peering over her shoulder, giving her advice she didn't need, showing up "just to help out" when she interrogated a rough suspect. He meant well, she supposed, but he was a four-star nuisance.

Captain Rooney took an old briar pipe from his ashtray, tamped down the tobacco, and lit it. "Well, Frost, I'm not naming any names. Suffice to say that I've treated you as I would any man. And now, this afternoon, I want to get a look inside that excellent mind of yours." The captain paused significantly. He was a clear-eyed man with a granite profile, bristly grey hair trimmed army-fashion, and the calm assurance of one who knows the world and knows his place in it. "How much do you know about the Slasher file?"

SO THAT WAS IT: SHE SHOULD HAVE GUESSED. "I SUPPOSE everyone here knows something about it," she said evasively. "During the past two months over a hundred interviews have been conducted in that investigation. Everyone on the squad has helped out at one time or another, making interviews and filing reports, but only one guy knows the whole file: Harry Brown is in charge of that case."

"Don't be coy, Frost, please. I happen to know that you've been using all your spare time, these past couple of weeks, to go over that file yourself."

"Well, yes I have, but . . ."

"But you don't want to seem ambitious. Don't worry about that."

"When Harry Brown first opened that file, there had been only two murders. Harry recognized the similarities and put the two of them together: that was good police work. But since then eight weeks have gone by, two more young women have died, and Harry seems no closer than he ever was to arresting the maniac responsible. I've been thinking myself that it was about time someone else looked into the matter." It was getting late. The small windows of the captain's office glowed orange from the setting sun. "I have a personal interest in this case, Frost. The second victim, Mary Robie, was a friend of my daughter's. They taught at the same school. Mary was a charming girl, really wonderful. She sent me the most beautiful card after my daughter's funeral." He paused for a moment to clear his throat. Cynthia was surprised and touched: she'd never heard the captain discuss personal matters before. He was always so reserved.

Then someone rapped loudly on the office door. "What is it?" shouted the captain.

The door opened abruptly and Sergeant Harry Brown stepped into the room. "Say, Captain," he said loudly, "just about everybody . . ." He looked at Cynthia with surprise. "Well say, Frostie, what are you doing here? Working overtime?" He was a fat, middle-aged man who always wore rumpled blue suits and always smoked rancid black cigars. "Thought you'd gone home."

"Just visiting with the captain," Cynthia replied archly. Harry Brown had first thought up the nickname, and now almost everyone on the squad called her "Frostie." She much preferred "Frost" or even "Cindy," but she didn't complain because she knew that complaining only encouraged people like Harry Brown.

"Well, I was going to say, captain, that everybody else has gone home. And I'm just going myself. You want me to unplug the coffee pot and turn off the lights?"

"Yes, Harry, why don't you do that? We'll be leaving in a few minutes ourselves."

"Sure thing." Harry gave a cheery little half salute and left the room, shutting the door behind him.

"Coffee pot my eye." Captain Rooney shook his head wisely. "Poor Harry. He's not much of a detective, but he's an awfully efficient busybody. He knew very well you were in here, and his curiosity got the best of him. He may even be worried that I'm going to turn the Slasher case over to you."

"And are you?" Cynthia asked with barely suppressed eagerness.

"That all depends. I've been reviewing the case myself, a little, and I wanted to go over the main points with you, just to see if that brain of yours has come up with anything new. If it has, you'll be free to follow up. But if not, then I suppose Harry can continue to plod along on the case until he gets a lucky break or until the Slasher runs out of razors." He smiled mirthlessly. "So if you've got any new angles, let's hear them."

CYNTHIA SAT UP A LITTLE STRAIGHTER IN HER CHAIR. "WELL in fact, captain, I do believe I've uncovered a sort of hidden thread connecting the four murders. As you know, with a killer like the Slasher — a psychopath who never kills for profit or revenge or any other normal motive — we still look for some pattern, because there always is a bizarre logic of some sort operating in even the most twisted mind."

"Yes, you're right." The windows had ceased to glow orange, and the small room was rapidly darkening. Captain Rooney reached across his desk and switched on a gooseneck lamp. "And have you found some logic behind the Slasher's crimes?"

"Yes, I think I have. The first two victims were teachers. Yet aside from that, they had absolutely nothing in common, had never even met. So at first, it seemed, the link was that the Slasher was after teachers."

"Yes, but . . ."

"But," Cynthia continued, "the third victim was a housewife, not a teacher. I know. Yet there is a connection. Before she got married, the third victim had attended, but not graduated from, the same college as the first victim."

"Harry Brown mentioned that in one of his reports," said the captain. "He spent two whole days following that idea up, but it came to nothing. And besides, the fourth victim had never gone to college at all. She was a part-time cocktail waitress with a very shady past, whereas all the other victims were average, wholesome women. Nothing in common at all."

"True," said Cynthia. "And the fact that she's so entirely unlike the others makes the last victim the most important one. If we can find the link between her and the others, I've been thinking, we can find the Slasher."

The captain had been so absorbed in their conversation he'd for-

gotten to keep his pipe alive. He set it down now in the ashtray. "And do you know what that link is, Frost?"

"I think I do." Cynthia struggled to appear calm while inwardly she bubbled with nervous energy. This was the biggest case she'd ever had a chance to work on. The newspapers had given front-page treatment to its every development. And with each new murder, they'd made the police department, Southside Homicide, and especially Captain Rooney, out to be bumbling clowns. If she could solve this case, she could rescue her captain from professional embarrassment, help rid the police department of a foul blot on its record, and most important of all, save the lives of numberless young women who might otherwise fall before the Slasher's blade.

Cynthia noticed, tacked to the wall in a dark corner of the office, a large city map. "Do you mind if I mark on that map?"

"No, go ahead." The captain turned the gooseneck lamp so that it shone on the map.

CYNTHIA TOOK A PENCIL FROM HER POCKET AND, WALKING over to the map, drew a small circle near its center. "This is the cocktail bar where the last victim was employed." She drew another circle about a foot away. "This is her apartment." She drew another circle. "This is where the third victim, the housewife, was murdered. As you can see . . ." She traced a route along principal streets from the cocktail bar to the apartment, "it's entirely possible that the waitress, returning home from work, would drive by the scene of the third murder."

"Very good work, Frost. Really smart." The captain's rich voice was full of genuine approval and admiration.

"That's not all, captain," said Cynthia proudly. "I checked with the manager, and that waitress got off work at the bar about a half hour before the approximate time of the third murder. I've driven over this route, and I think there's every likelihood that she was passing the murder scene just about the time the Slasher was finishing his work. She must have seen him; he knew that she saw him, and four days later he killed her."

"But if she saw the murderer, why didn't she notify the police?"

Cynthia faltered: she hadn't thought to ask herself that question. Her mind raced anxiously and then, in a moment of inspiration, she found the answer. "She didn't call us because she didn't know, at first, what it was she'd seen. Remember how it took the newspapers a

couple of days to find out that the third killing had been linked to the first two? At first they buried the story in the back pages, where the waitress might not have seen it, but on the third day, when they found we suspected the Slasher, they brought it out on page one. It was then that she read the details of time and place and realized that she'd seen the killer."

The captain stroked his chin thoughtfully. "Maybe so. But if that's the way it happened, then why didn't she call us on the fourth day? The papers came out almost twenty-four hours before she was murdered. Yet there's not the slightest scrap of a note anywhere in Harry's file to indicate she'd ever been in touch with us. Why is that?"

Cynthia's mind didn't race this time: she saw the answer at once, but it took her a moment to accept the truth when she saw it. Yet there could be no other explanation. "I think she did call us, captain. I think she called, I think someone took that call, and I think that that someone, instead of making a note and filing it, went out to the girl's apartment and cut her throat."

"Now slow down, Frost. Do you realize what you're saying?"

"I'm saying that someone in this squad is the Slasher."

"Not just someone, Frost. You're saying that Harry Brown is the Slasher. He's the guy who takes all the calls on that case."

"Well, I . . ." She hadn't pushed her theory quite that far, but now that she thought about it, she saw that it had to be true. "Well, I guess that's what I'm saying."

"And if it's true — though I'm not at all convinced it is — then it would be easy to understand why Harry's been monopolizing this case, giving bits and scraps of it to other detectives, but keeping the big picture to himself." The captain turned his gooseneck lamp so that it once again shone on the heaps of papers on his desk. "I've got photocopies of the whole Slasher file here, Frost. I'm going to examine them for anything, even the slightest shred, that would contradict your theory. Harry's been a cop for twenty-odd years. A good cop, though not a brilliant one. I can't accuse him, can't even breathe a suspicion, unless I'm absolutely certain." He stood up heavily and opened the office door. "Why don't you go home now. You've done your work, let me do mine. We'll talk again tomorrow."

"Yes, sir. Goodnight." Cynthia left the office, and as she did so, the bubbling energy that had sustained her while talking with the captain drained from her, leaving her deeply weary. Harry Brown the Slasher! She could scarcely believe it, though it had to be true. Numbly

she made her way through the jumble of desks and filing cabinets in the darkened squad room, walked down the hallway, down the stairs, bid an inattentive goodnight to the uniformed sergeant at the desk and went out behind the police station to the parking lot.

IT WAS LATE. THE MOON WAS IN THE SKY, BUT THE PARKING lot was in darkness. She walked to her car, but then, in the gloom, couldn't find her car keys amid the clutter of her purse. Impatiently she looked around the lot, seeking a glimmer of light from a window or street lamp, but there was no light anywhere.

And then she noticed, deep in the shadows, a man in a hat and dark suit, silently watching her. She peered intently: my God, it was Harry Brown. And as she stood watching, he reached into his coat and drew out a gun.

Her heart pounding with fear, she turned to flee. And there, not ten steps behind her, was Captain Rooney, walking rapidly toward her with a look of grim determination on his face. "Oh, Captain! Look out, there's Harry . . ." But he wasn't listening. He raised his right arm swiftly, a bright razor gleaming in his hand.

A shot rang out. The captain stumbled, his face betraying shock and surprise. His upraised arm fell limply to his side, and then he dropped to the ground.

"Are you all right, Frostie?" asked Harry Brown quietly as he stepped up beside her, the smoking gun in his hand.

"Yes, Harry. Thanks."

"How you doing, captain? You going to live?"

The prostrate figure groaned painfully.

"Hm. You better call an ambulance, Frostie. I aimed to wound him, but you never know, he might try to die on us."

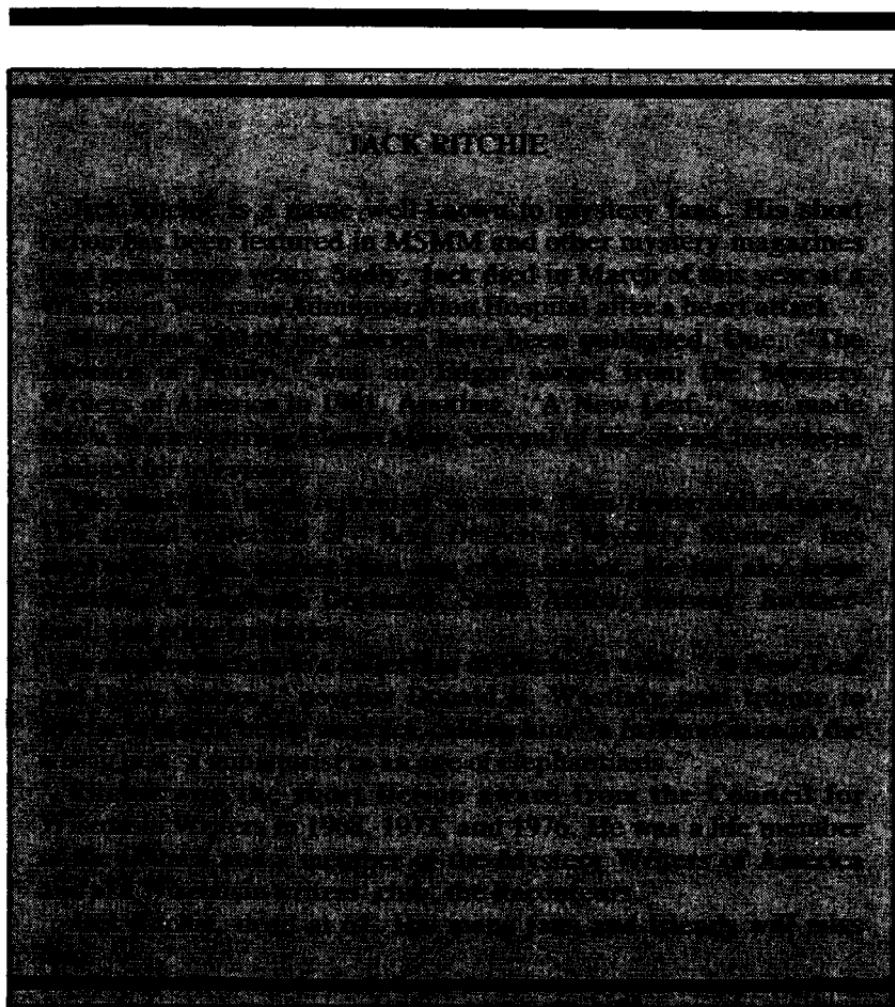
"Is he the Slasher, Harry?"

"The one and only. His first three victims had all been friends of his deceased daughter, two in college, and one later, when she was teaching. We can leave it to the headshrinkers to figure out why he murdered them."

"I was just about ready to get him when the fourth girl got killed. Her death blew my theory, so I had to hold off. You can't go arresting a police captain unless you're darn sure you can make it stick, and I couldn't figure out how the fourth girl fit into the pattern. But you solved that question for me, just by looking at a city map. Awful clever, Frostie."

"How did you know about that, Harry? Can you read my mind or something?"

"Nothing so deep as that. I just listened at the door while you explained the whole thing to the captain. And I knew right then he'd try to make you victim number five, but not in his office. He's not that crazy. So I waited out here." Harry grinned modestly. "I may not be much of a detective, but I sure can be one snoopy busybody." ●



The warden couldn't believe it, yet there was the evidence before his eyes: the female convict had been in the prison almost one hundred years!

The Time Of Her Life

by DAN J. MARLOWE

WARDEN MEL BAILEY LOOKED OUT FROM HIS OFFICE window at the high stone wall separating the men's and women's wings of the state prison. Both wings were enclosed behind a higher stone wall which cut them off from the outside world.

Bailey had been warden for one week. He knew he had a lot to do. The penal system in the southern state was so antiquated he felt he could adopt only the most tested and proven reforms and still effect a remarkable transformation. He had merely to continue to impress upon his staff that the former brutal and intolerant methods of doing things would no longer be permitted.

He walked to his desk and depressed the speaker button on his intercom. "Matron Fuller to the warden's office," he ordered.

He lit a cigarette while he waited. There was a knock at his door, and Matron Captain Viola Fuller entered. She was a slab of a woman who bulged her gray uniform. A wide black belt of hand-tooled leather encircled her chunky waist, and Bailey noted with satisfaction that a billy club no longer hung from the belt.

Bailey gestured at a group of folders on his desk. "I asked to see the five oldest women in the prison, Matron. You sent me four crones and a tall mulatto named Jessica Strange who can't be over thirty-five."

The matron's brow furrowed. "I sent you the ones with the lowest numbers, warden," she explained. "The ones who had been here longest. Some of these niggers just don't age a-tall."

Bailey started to remonstrate with her, then checked himself. Billy clubs were one thing, patterns of speech another. Some habits weren't so easily changed. "Strange's folder covers only her last two years here," he said. "I'd like to see her complete file."

Bailey stared down at the Strange folder when the matron departed. Now that he thought about it, the woman's registration number was amazing. The prison was over ninety years old, and new arrivals were being assigned numbers well over two hundred thousand in the consecutive number series. Convict Jessica Strange was #11754.

A trusty entered the office from the men's wing after knocking. He placed three huge file folders on Bailey's desk. They gave off a musty odor that permeated the office. Bailey checked the dates on the outside of the folders, searching for the oldest one. He picked it up in disbelief. According to the neat hand-lettering on the cover, Jessica Strange had been admitted to the prison on Wednesday, July 6th, 1887, to serve a five year sentence for robbery.

Anger replaced Bailey's surprise. He had an ingrained disliking for error, even minor error, and this was ridiculous. He reached for his intercom again. "Send Convict #11754 back in here again!" he snapped.

IT TOOK FIVE MINUTES BEFORE JESSICA STRANGE ONCE more stood in front of Bailey's desk. The woman was almost six feet tall, and Bailey estimated her weight at a hundred fifty pounds. Her hair was jet black, her skin chocolate. Her face was unlined except for tiny wrinkles at the corners of her eyes. Her eyes, in fact, were the only unusual facet of her appearance. Bailey looked more closely. Yes, the

irises were definitely pink.

"How long have you been here?" Bailey demanded.

"A long time, sir. Many years." The voice was rhythmical and low-pitched. To Bailey's ear it had the neutral accent of network radio announcers, free from regional characteristics.

"How long is that?" Bailey asked sharply.

The woman nodded at the folders on the desk. "Don't they tell you what you wish to know, sir?"

Bailey tested the voice for a hint of insolence, but found none. He wished he had examined the folders more closely before calling in the woman. "You may go now," he said abruptly. When his office door closed behind her, he turned to the records.

Each folder held a four-inch stack of papers. Each had the name Jessica Strange printed on it in large black letters along with the same prison registration number. Bailey's hasty examination of the dates on the first and last documents indicated that the files spanned the years consecutively from the woman's supposed arrival in 1887 to the present. The final entry was a report certifying that Convict #11754 was performing her duties as library clerk with speed and accuracy. It was dated a week previously.

Bailey's irritation mounted. He jerked the oldest folder toward him and started through it page by page. Irritation was quickly replaced by amazement. The papers were yellow and brittle with age. The ink used for the fancy penmanship had faded to a light brown. In a few cases it had almost disappeared.

The very first document was an ornate commitment paper from the township of Jessica, stating that Jessica Strange had been found guilty of the crime of robbery and sentenced to a term of five years. Attached to the commitment, but not really a part of it, were two clippings from the JEFFERSON WEEKLY JOURNAL. The first, dated May 21st, 1887, read:

METEOR AIDS CRIME

The countryside was wakened Thursday last by an explosion that shook the ground. Silas James, proprietor of the General Store, witnessed a red glow in the sky. Sheriff Sloan and other townspeople rode out to investigate. The fire was not at one of the nearby farm-houses as first thought, but was located in the wooded area along the west bank of the Vidalia River.

The meteor had cut a path forty-five feet wide through several acres of pin oaks before ending its flight in the river. Witnesses observed the water bubbling and steaming above the spot where it had sunk out of sight. Closer observation was impossible since the river was at flood stage. Burning trees cast weird highlights on the awesome spectacle. Fortunately no habitation was involved in the holocaust.

Sheriff Sloan remarked that the incident was not entirely an ill wind. He had long been attempting to discourage itinerant field hands from making camp in the woods south of town. The sheriff now believes the meteor may have taken care of it for him. He has received reports of several nigras fleeing the area as though Satan himself were pursuing them.

Silas James offered the group refreshment upon its return to town. The front door of the General Store was found hanging from its hinges. Sheriff Sloan entered first and subdued with some difficulty the thief who was inside. The captured individual, a husky naked black wench, refused to answer questions with anything save gibberish at first, then took refuge in silence.

Sheriff Sloan stated that the thief was undoubtedly one of the blacks who had been camping on the river bank. He locked up the woman in a cell behind the sheriff's office. The Circuit Judge is being notified, and an example will be made. Lazy blacks will learn that emancipation doesn't give them the right to steal from hard-working whites.

The woman still refuses to speak, even to identify herself. Because she was captured in the township of Jessica, and because of her singular behavior (she refuses to eat meat), she has been given the name Jessica Strange. It will serve until she decides to make known her own patronymic.

Warden Bailey leaned back in his chair and stared up at the ceiling. Then he picked up the second clipping which was dated June 11, 1887. It read:

The trial of black mute Jessica Strange was held Wednesday, June 8th, at the Farmers Hall. The woman, who has remained silent since her capture inside the General Store on the night of May 19th, learned that justice here comes swiftly. After a trial lasting thirty minutes, during which she showed no interest in defending herself, she was convicted and sentenced to five years at hard labor by the Honorable Wilbur Masters, presiding. Several . . .

Bailey skimmed the remainder of the second article and found it to be a re-hash of the events leading to the arrest. He set the clippings aside before turning to the next documents in the folder.

Jessica Strange had arrived at the prison on July 6th, 1887. A complete description, following the Bertillon system of cataloguing body measurements and physical characteristics, included estimated age, height, weight, and coloring. All agreed with the present description of the woman who had been standing in front of Bailey's desk five minutes before. In the space reserved for eye color a firm hand had printed PINK.

Bailey reached for his telephone. "Get me Dr. Anderson," he said. Dr. Theodore Anderson was the only member of the prison staff known personally to Mel Bailey prior to assuming his new post. "Ted? Mel here. I'm sending a woman over to you right now for a complete physical. I'd like you to report the result to me personally. What?" He smiled. "I'm sorry I'm interfering with your chess-by-mail project. Hurry it up; will you, Ted? There's something peculiar going on around here."

He summoned a matron and had Jessica Strange taken to the prison hospital. He returned to the yellowing files while he waited for Anderson's report. The next few pages consisted of disciplinary reports listing numerous violations and the number of lashes the woman had received in the prison courtyard for each. She had been whipped an average of once a month during 1887 and 1888. The violations ranged from "disregarding orders" to "being uppity" and "assaulting a matron."

The next item was a faded pencil-written note which the woman's side nightkeeper had sent to the guard captain on September 8th, 1889:

This night, whilst making my evening rounds of the black cellblocks, I heard muttering. I discovered Convict #11754 in Cell G-131 reading aloud to herself in stumbling fashion. She was reading from the Bible by moonlight. You will recall that #11754 is the tall mulatto who refuses to speak. I reminded her of the rule of silence after sundown, but since she seemed to be disturbing no one, I refrained from chalking her cell to have her await your pleasure in the morning as I ordinarily would have. It will be interesting to note whether her deportment improves under the influence of the Good Book.

Apparently not. New violations appeared on the ever-lengthening list. "Talking during work hours" and "suspicion of plotting to escape" were added to numerous duplications of previous offenses.

The documents for the year 1890 revealed to Bailey how a woman sentenced to prison for five years could remain far longer. Still another newspaper clipping described an escape attempt. Jessica Strange had attacked a guard, somehow scaled the wall, and fled across the open fields. She was hunted down by dogs and recaptured within the hour. The attack upon the guard was deemed "vicious", resulting in permanent disability, and Jessica Strange received a life sentence.

The first photograph of Convict #11754 was attached to a document dated June 2nd, 1902. It was cracked and faded, but the features were unmistakable. The face in the picture Warden Mel Bailey held in his hand was the face of Jessica Strange.

New photographs appeared in the file at intervals of three to five years. They were all identical except for the increasing freshness of the prints. Although the bulk of the paperwork continued to indicate disciplinary action, favorable comments of work supervisors appeared occasionally. Then changes of work assignments began to be listed.

The woman's early duties had all involved unskilled labor, principally in the mess hall. Gradually she began to assume more responsible positions. By 1908 she was in charge of the women's dining room.

The next item in the folder was a wax-sealed envelope marked in heavy black crayon TO WARDEN FENSTER — FOR THINE EYES ONLY. Bailey didn't hesitate. He ripped open the envelope and hurriedly scanned its handwritten contents.

I have to report, sir, the single sheet began, that on this night, May 5th 1909. Convict #11754 when given her baby to nurse, strangled it before the eyes of those present. I would remind you that the two guards involved in the rape last year, and the matron who connived at it, all were discharged. I await your instructions. Signed Wilberforce Pingree.

There were no instructions, Bailey found. No written instructions. Official silence at its most silent, he thought angrily. What had happened? Only the woman herself knew. If it was the same woman?

The second and third file folders continued the story begun in the first. Jessica Strange moved from the kitchen to semi-skilled and then to skilled work in the prison shops. She then moved on to clerical positions. The establishment of a prison library in the women's wing in

the 1950's had ended her gypsy ways within the prison walls. She had worked in the library as a clerk since the library's inception. Disciplinary reports gradually decreased until they disappeared entirely in the final folder.

WARDEN MEL BAILEY WAS STARING OUT HIS OFFICE WINDOW when Dr. Ted Anderson arrived. "What was the rush?" Anderson grumbled. "She's a fine physical specimen."

"You didn't find anything — ah — unusual?"

"You mean her back. We don't see much criss-crossed scar tissue like that nowadays, for a fact. I asked her about it, but she refused to answer me."

"No, Ted. Not her back. You didn't find anything really unusual?"

Anderson frowned. "The mere fact she's confined here and isn't suffering from a dozen ailments is fairly unusual."

"Her eyes," Bailey said impatiently. "What about her eyes?"

The doctor smiled. "It did jolt me for a moment. I haven't seen the condition often. She has 20/30 vision, though. Remarkable vision."

"What is this condition you mention?"

"She has the eyes of an albino. It's caused by a lack of pigment. There's no melanin. The eyes are transparent, colored by the blood behind them."

"But the woman isn't an albino."

Anderson shrugged. "It's probably as rare as bird droppings in a cuckoo clock, but it happens."

"How do you know? How do you know it happens?" Bailey said it so quickly that his words all ran together.

The doctor's smile changed. It shifted from genial good humor to a professional bedside cheeriness. "That's the kind of eyes the woman has, so it happens."

Bailey snorted. "How old did she say she was?"

"She didn't. When I asked she said she didn't know. It's not uncommon. I estimate it at between thirty-five and forty."

"Between thirty-five and forty." Bailey leaned forward over his desk. "Suppose I were to tell you that she entered the prison here in 1887, Ted?"

Anderson's smile disappeared when he did the mental arithmetic. "It can't be, Mel. Is this a joke?"

Bailey removed the first photograph from the folder and showed it to Anderson. His thumb indicated the 1902 date.

The doctor pursed his lips. "A clerical error."

Bailey threw up his hands. "Ted, you're not — "

"You're telling me that Jessica Strange is not human," Anderson interrupted.

"That's right."

"No, it's *not* right. Although I gathered that's what you're thinking. I just gave the woman a thorough examination, remember. She's in far better condition than the average inmate, but she *is* a woman."

Bailey grabbed the first two newspaper clippings from the first folder and handed them to Anderson. "Don't you see how it all fits together?" he asked eagerly when Anderson had finished reading. "A spaceship crashes, leaving one of its crew helpless on a strange planet. She can't make herself understood in her own language, so she remains silent until she learns ours. I tell you this woman — this being, Ted — is a hundred years old."

"You're overwrought, Mel," Ted Anderson said soothingly. "The explanation will be perfectly simple when we find it. The first thing I'd do is audit these records. Say, did Jessica Strange ever work in the records department? Maybe she doctored them herself."

"Doctored them and then waited for somebody to discover them by accident? You don't really believe that, Ted."

There was a stubborn look on the prison physician's face. Mel Bailey knew Ted Anderson as a hard-drinking sophisticate who preferred the even tenor of institutional life to the competitive aspects of private practice, but he also knew him as a capable physician and a hardheaded, practical-minded individual.

"I know what I believe," Bailey said softly. "And if what I believe is true, this woman — this creature — could be here for another hundred years. Or five hundred." He overrode a comment Anderson tried to make. "Her records are marked 'dangerous'. She hasn't been outside the prison wall since her escape attempt."

He picked up his telephone. "Get me Matron Fuller, please." He examined the crinkled 1902 photograph again while he waited. "Ah, yes, Matron," he said briskly. "I want Convict #11754 included as a helper on the next laundry truck that goes out to the prison farm." He listened for a moment. "I'm aware that she's never allowed outside the walls. I just gave you an order, Matron."

"You may believe it, Mel, but I don't believe it." Ted Anderson's eyes were on the thick folders. "But may I look through these?"

"Let's go to lunch first," Bailey suggested.

They left the office together.

WARDEN MEL BAILEY AND DR. TED ANDERSON WERE BACK IN the warden's office at 4:20 P.M. A transistor radio on the desk was tuned low to the news channel. Their argument had been raging all afternoon.

"Tell me why a woman — all right, a creature with supposedly supernatural powers — would *stay* here all those years?" Ted Anderson demanded. "It doesn't make — "

Bailey held up a warning hand as he turned up the volume on the radio. " — localized in the area south of town," the announcer's voice said. "A footbridge was carried away on the west bank of the Vidalia River, and a barn half a mile away was knocked off its foundations. The waterspout caused by the small tornado was seen by a dozen persons. No injuries have been reported at this time. Please stay tuned for — "

Bailey turned off the radio. Before either man could speak the administrative channel of the prison loudspeaker system came on above their heads. "Now hear this!" it blared. "Convict #11754 knocked out Guard Tom Shannon at the prison farm and made her escape. Repeat: her escape. This is a woman. When last seen she was heading west toward the river. All security personnel will take appropriate measures immediately. Repeat: Convict — "

The warden lowered the volume on the loudspeaker until the brassy voice died to a whisper. "Except for her physical strength and longevity," he said, "she wasn't supernatural until she could get back into the spaceship. We'll never hear from Jessica Strange again."

Dr. Ted Anderson rose to his feet. "You have my verbal resignation right now, Mel. I'll get the written one to you in an hour."

"Oh, come on, Ted!" Bailey protested. "I may have bent things a little — "

It was Anderson's turn to hold up a silencing hand. "I'm not moralizing, Mel. I just don't believe you realize what you've done. If you're right, that is, which I still doubt. But I'm not going to take a chance. Considering the treatment Jessica Strange received from us — " he gestured at the yellowing records on the desk top " — to the point of having to throttle her own baby to prevent its being institutionalized, I just don't care to be a sitting duck here if she chooses to retaliate."

He strode energetically to the door of the office while Warden Mel Bailey stared after him blankly. ●

She hadn't changed much in ten years, except she was no longer available. She was unhappily married, but that was something that could be taken care of — violently, if need be!

Second Chance

by DICK STODGHILL

I WATCH HER FROM ACROSS THE ROOM. PRETENDING TO SIP coffee, busying myself with lighting a cigarette, but always watching.

Ten years haven't changed her much. Still petite, still vivacious in a subdued way. Some of the other girls — women, now — have changed considerably. Not just the inevitable differences: new hair styles, an added inch or two at the waist, the first hint of lines in skin that had been creamy smooth. Those changes are of no importance. The ones that matter are the signs of hurt or despair, of disillusionment or, worst of all, acceptance. They show in the eyes and around the mouth, can't be concealed by makeup or a new dress or a trip to a hair stylist.

But Jenny looks the same. Her brown hair isn't shoulder length and silky now, its frizzy curls that toss and bob when she turns her head or leans back to study a new arrival, then smile in delayed recognition. Her skirt falls just below her knees, not three inches above them anymore. Her cheeks may not be quite so full but still she looks the same. Except for the gold band on the third finger of her left hand.

SHE HASN'T SEEN ME SITTING JUST BEYOND THE GLOW OF the crystal chandelier that lights all but the outer reaches of the

ballroom. Jenny was never a pretender. If she had known I was coming she would have been watching for me and if she knew I was here she would smile her dimpled smile, wave, and come over. But no one knew I was coming and few realize or care that I am here. Soon someone will tell her, though, and that's why I'm watching now, before she knows. Jenny was never a pretender but having me around would make a difference.

A man who has been standing at the makeshift bar in one corner walks to her table and sits down, blocking my view of her. He is sullen, bored with the people he doesn't know, and his resentment shows. His back is to me but I can see it in the set of his shoulders, the way he holds his head.

Three others are at the table with me. People I once knew, or thought I did, but being with them now means being alone. I look around the long, rectangular room, remembering it from long ago. On prom night the woodwork around the doors and windows had been polished and glowing. Now it has been painted white and the walls are pink. Only the chandelier remains unspoiled.

Some faces are familiar but many are not. Wives or husbands tied to the class of '73 but a little ill at ease because they are outsiders, not really a part of all this. Most are content to sit or stand quietly, smiling politely when forced to meet yet another person they never heard of, don't really care to know, will forget in two minutes. Still smiling, and trying to make it an understanding smile, when told some anecdote that is amusing only to those who were a part of it. Listening with the same pasted-on smile as each new introduction is followed by, "This is the one I told you . . ." or "You should have been there when . . ." or something similar.

Even some of the class members have a glassy-eyed look that says they are wondering why they ever let themselves in for something like this, something that isn't at all the way they thought it would be. They are pleasant enough when someone accosts them gushing, "Why, it's . . .", but approach no one themselves, aside from the bartender.

Others seem to be enjoying themselves, though, acting as self-appointed hosts or hostesses. They scurry about the room, pausing here and there for a breathless word, a quick laugh. Latecomers are descended upon, taken by the elbow and hurried to some group to be greeted by hugs or handshakes, back-slapping or gales of laughter.

And of course a few, most of them men, seem compelled to impress old classmates with their success. The more ostentatious they are or

the noisier they are the more it comes across that they aren't doing well at all.

Seeing them together again, I realize that I never really knew any of them, just their names and their faces. Aside from Jenny. I knew Jenny. Not the others, though, because I was never a part of anything back then. I went to class, went to basketball games, sometimes went to a dance or party, but I wasn't actually a part of any of it, a real participant. That was how I wanted it.

MY GLASS IS EMPTY AND I HAVE HEARD ENOUGH OF THE silly prattle, the excited whispering of the others at the table. Enough of the pointing and the, "Look, isn't that . . .", and, "Who do you suppose that woman is with him? Surely he wouldn't . . ." When someone who has been to the bar too often throws his arm over the shoulder of the man next to him and starts singing, "Midland Central, our Midland Central . . .," I murmur an excuse that no one seems to notice and go to the bar myself.

They are lined up two-deep so I stand and wait my turn at one end where I won't feel hemmed in. I exchange a few nods and smiles, even a couple of handshakes, but nothing more. Eventually one of the harried men behind the bar pours equal amounts of vodka and club soda into a glass and hands it to me in exchange for three dollar bills. I stir it myself, something he didn't bother to do.

Suddenly I am aware that Jenny is beside me. The hint of gardenia, different on her than anyone else, would have told me anywhere. I turn and she is standing close, smiling up at me. And still she is the same. The little twinkle in her brown eyes, the white teeth just imperfect enough to look real.

All I say is, "Jenny." And all I do is touch her hand. A tentative touch quickly ended.

"How are you, Tom?" she asks.

How am I? How would I describe it? Exhilarated, somewhere in the clouds. Devastated, the ground pulled from under my feet. A record high, a new low, mixed together in something indescribable because Jenny's here again but now she isn't mine.

"Fine, Jenny, just fine. How about you?"

"Fine, Tom." She lowers her eyes, then raises them again and the twinkle is gone. "I'm married, you know."

I look away and nod.

She laughs softly, a little uncomfortably. "Mrs. Brian McLeod," she

says, and there is something in the way she says it that I don't understand. But she's not Jenny Williams anymore, she's Jenny McLeod. Mrs. Brian McLeod.

A band has begun to play, but not a song from '73. Something quieter, more sentimental, from a generation before ours. A few couples are already on the floor.

"Dance, Jenny?" She smiles again and I know it means yes.

FOR A WHILE I'M CONTENT JUST HOLDING HER AGAIN, LOST somewhere in the only world I ever wanted. A world I might have had, tried to have, but fumbled away. But all that is forgotten for a moment or two. Then Jenny looks up at me and says, "Where did you go, Tom?"

Why lie about it, why pretend? I look deep into her brown eyes and say, "To prison."

They change, of course. The twinkle is gone again but she doesn't turn them away. They pose a question, though, but I know she'll never ask it, never put it into words. That wouldn't be Jenny's way. So I tell her, "Armed robbery. A bank, and the man with me killed a guard. I was tried for murder, too, but acquitted. I served eight years at Rahway."

She waits a little, then says, "You must have needed the money badly."

For you, Jenny, I think to myself. But how like you to see it from my point of view rather than condemn or moralize. And the bank hadn't been the first because I wanted lots of money. A job in one of the factories, a weekly pay check, that wasn't enough for you, Jenny. You were the daughter of a shop worker but I didn't want you to be the wife of one. I had bigger things in mind. Real money and all it could do. Now I have it, stashed away in different places they've never been able to find, but I don't have you.

She looks at me strangely, seems to peer into the darkest recesses of my mind, and too late I realize why. She has felt the hard bulge under my left arm and thinks I haven't changed. But I have, at least for a while. The gun in the special pocket sewn into my jacket is for protection from my own kind, the few who also know the money is out there somewhere and might decide they want it for themselves.

Of course Jenny doesn't know that and yet she doesn't seem disturbed. She is smiling again, smiling with her mouth and eyes. We glide around the floor quietly for a few moments, continuing when the

orchestra goes on to a second number, and a third.

Then Jenny asks, "Are you staying here at the hotel?" and I tell her that I am. "So are we," she says. "We live in town but I thought it would be more fun to have a room at the hotel."

"Do you have children?" I ask. Without preface the question once asked seems too blunt, too personal. I am pleased, though, when she shakes her head. But I look at her, puzzled for a moment, when she says, "Thank God."

Then I understand. In a way that pleases me, too. But it saddens me as well because I have always wanted Jenny to be happy. I want that more than anything else, even more than I want her for my own.

"Problems?" I ask, and she lowers her head for a moment, then turns slowly until her eyes focus on her right arm. Mine follow and I see two faint bruises, barely visible above the right elbow. For an instant anger surges inside me, then I control it, force myself to remain detached. It's her business, not mine, unless she chooses to make it so.

THE MUSIC STOPS AND WE WALK TOGETHER BACK TO THE bar. We talk a little, small talk about the old days while I try to attract a bartender. I turn, though, when someone says, "An old flame, Jenny?"

It's the sullen man who was at her table earlier. He is about my size and weight, even looks a little like me. At close range, however, there is an air of timidity about him and a petulant look in his eyes. I've met his type before, the kind who bow and scrape to those above them but are mean and petty when dealing with those of lesser authority. To him, that would mean Jenny.

As she introduces us Jenny, uncharacteristically, seems flustered, unsure of herself. He smiles from one side of his mouth but it isn't genuine. I reach out and grip his hand, find it flaccid and unresponsive.

But alcohol has made him bold and loosened his tongue. Even so he doesn't meet my eyes when he says, "So you're the old lover my wife is always hankering after?" He's loud and heads turn.

There is nothing to say in reply. I stare at him while Jenny touches his arm and whispers, "Please, Brian."

He brushes her hand away, pretending to be surprised. "Oh, I'm sorry," he says mockingly. "I didn't realize it was supposed to be a secret." He moves his head to encompass the room in what he's

saying. "I'm afraid it's out of the bag, though. Everybody's saying how nice it is to see the ex-lovers together again."

The room is quiet, he has gained everyone's attention. Jenny has a waxen look. I can feel the anger rising again. "Just how do you mean that?" I ask him. Jenny turns to me, distressed, and shakes her head.

He is enjoying the scene he has created. It's his big moment, a new experience for him, so he basks in the spotlight and relishes her discomfort. "How do I mean it?" he mimics. "I mean it in every sense the term implies." Then, to Jenny, "But I shouldn't have believed, my dear, that you'd flaunt your old bedmates in public this way."

Even as I reach out, grab the front of his shirt and pull him close to me, I realize he knows the lie of what he has said better than anyone else and that I am only doing what he wants, adding to Jenny's humiliation. Fear flickers in his eyes but he has gone too far to stop now. He lashes out at me but his punch is weak and ineffective, easily blocked with my free arm. I draw back to retaliate but Jenny locks both hands around my wrist. "No, Tom, no," she says pleadingly. "Please, just go now. No more, please."

For a moment I stay poised, wanting to strike back, shaken to see her so dismayed. Then I lower my arm and loosen my grip, turn and walk quickly away.

I GO STRAIGHT TO MY ROOM, CLIMBING THE TWO FLIGHTS OF stairs rather than wait for the elevator. I take off my tie and shoes, hang my jacket over the back of a chair, and stretch out on the bed.

Thinking that I shouldn't have come, should have had the sense to stay away, doesn't help because being aware of it doesn't eradicate the pain I have inflicted on Jenny. I have hurt her, the one thing above all else that I never wanted to do. For several hours I try to think of a way to make it up to her, to help her straighten out her life. No answers are forthcoming and mixing an occasional drink from the bottles on the dresser doesn't provide any.

A soft tapping on the door jars me from the funk I have been in. I glance at my watch and it's past midnight. When I open the door, Jenny is standing there. We look at each other for several seconds and I can see she has been crying. I step aside, and when the door has closed behind her we embrace. This may only complicate her situation, I think to myself, but she wants to talk so I don't discourage her. She sits down, sniffling a little, while I mix two drinks. When I turn back to her she is smiling, even with her eyes.

We talk for an hour. She does most of it, telling me the details of her life but never complaining, rationalizing instead, making excuses for him. But that would be Jenny's way. We make no attempt to arrive at a solution but when she says she must leave it's with the promise that we will meet again. Although neither of us puts it into words, there is an understanding between us that something will be done to get her life on track again.

ANOTHER HOUR PASSES BEFORE I FINALLY FALL INTO A fitful sleep. Light streams in the open window when the crashing in of the door jerks me suddenly awake. Two men with guns in hand confront me. One is in uniform.

"Thomas Stapleton?" the other says. I nod, then sit quietly as he recites my rights from memory.

I think of the gun in the jacket draped over the chair where Jenny sat earlier. If they find it, which they surely will, it will be enough to send me back to prison. But while I am still trying to make some sense of what is happening in my sleep-fogged mind, another man in street clothes comes in. He walks to the side of the bed and holds out a plastic bag containing an object. "Is this your gun?" he asks.

I look at it and nod again. "Where did you get it?"

"From a trash container two floors up. Just down the hall from where it was used to kill a man."

"Brian McLeod?"

"You should know."

"How did you know it was mine?"

"We heard about your fight with him earlier, among other things. And we've checked your record so no need to play games about that."

I study him, but really am studying what he has said. When I have it straight in my mind I say, "I don't like games. I guess you've got it figured."

We talk a while, then they tell me to get dressed. While I button my shirt the detective who broke in the door stares at me, shaking his head. "It doesn't add up," he says. "A pro like you tossing a gun away just thirty feet from where he used it."

I shrug my shoulders. "I guess you boys were sharper than I thought."

He shakes his head again. "I don't think so. You know if you stick to this story you may not get a second chance."

He's right, I won't get a second chance. But Jenny will.



If there was one thing he'd learned in his reading it was keep it simple. This was no convoluted Agatha Christie plot, with a fictional detective on his trail!

Murder Most Simple

by CHARLES PETERSON

THE DRAWING ON THE BOOK JACKET PURPORTED TO SHOW Agatha Christie's famous detective, Hercule Poirot — a dapper little man with a high, intelligent forehead and penetrating eye, and glossy from his patent leather shoes to his luxuriant carefully waxed moustache and black pomaded hair.

Aubrey Morton studied the drawing with a little smile. *How complicated Monsieur Poirot's cases were, he thought, and how simple murder is, actually!* Sometimes, indeed, events arranged themselves so neatly that it was harder *not* to murder. Especially when one was aware that there was no Hercule Poirot for the Elm Grove Police Department to call upon — only a minuscule force more accustomed to dealing with parking tickets and stray dogs.

Aubrey Morton adjusted his reading lamp, took another swallow of his highball and sank back in his armchair. But before opening the book, he allowed his mind to drift back to the previous evening — the evening when he had murdered Jason Graham.

MURDER, OF COURSE, HAD BEEN THE FARTHEST THING FROM his mind — or nearly. He had eaten, as was his custom, at a restaurant near the office, returned home and, after a perfunctory scan of the

evening paper, repaired to his workshop in the garage, where he was engaged in assembling a curio cabinet from a kit purchased some months ago. Then the front doorbell rang, and he answered it to find Jason Graham standing on the front steps. Not standing, exactly, for Jason Graham was seldom still. Like many small, intense men, he seemed to be more or less in constant motion.

"Jason!" Morton said, in surprise. "I thought you were off on your vacation."

"I will be, in about fifteen minutes," Graham replied, with a quick glance at his watch. There was a grim set to his mouth that Morton found disquieting. "I want to straighten out something with you before I go."

"Oh? Well, come on back to the workshop."

Graham pushed ahead, disdaining Morton's lead. *Typical*, Morton thought. *Always rushing in as if he owned the place!* He shuddered suddenly with the wave of dislike that swept over him. *Always pushing, always making snide remarks about how much he contributes to the business compared with everyone else. Always shoving in his opinions as though he'd got the Word on tablets of stone.* Aubrey Morton's mouth twitched behind Graham's back and he thought, *Let him have his fun!*

"Still not telling anyone where you're headed — even Nora?" said Morton conversationally. He picked up a hammer and turned to his workbench. "You don't mind if I go on with this?" he asked rhetorically.

"No, I'm still not telling — even Nora. It wouldn't be twenty-four hours before someone would be after me about some crisis in the office."

The truly indispensable man! Morton thought, starting a nail carefully.

"But my vacation plans are none of your affair," Graham went on, his voice taking on a steely tone. "It's what happens after I return that concerns you. You see, I've suspected for some time that we weren't earning the kind of profits our sales indicated, so I've been doing some checking, down at the office."

Morton stopped pounding, a sudden chill in his midriff.

"And I find the profits are there, all right, but they seem to have a way of getting into your pocket instead of the firm's bank account!"

"That's a serious accusation!" Morton sputtered.

Jason's lip curled in a sneer. "Please! At least spare me that 'What-

ever do you mean?' garbage! I'm not sure precisely how you worked it, though I found some invoices that gave me a clue — with your initials authorizing payment. But enough of that! For the sake of the firm, I'll give you until I get back to figure out a way of making restitution and resigning gracefully. The alternative is exposure and prosecution!"

Morton, speechless, kept his expression impassive by sheer force of will, but was unable fully to suppress his feeling of panic as he stared at Jason Graham, who returned his look with eyes that glittered with inward amusement.

"And one more thing," Jason continued, in a deliberately offensive manner. "I find that you've added wife-stealing to your other accomplishments. Don't look so shocked," he added, at Morton's gasp. "I've been aware of what you and Nora were up to for some months now. Well, that's over and done with, too — or I'll see to it that there's a scandal that will blow you right off that sanctimonious pillar-of-the-community perch of yours on the Civic Improvement Council. I trust we thoroughly understand each other — and your alternatives?"

Jason gave Morton a contemptuous snort and turned to go. And something snapped within Aubrey Morton. *There's a third alternative you haven't considered, you fool!* he thought, as he swung the hammer with all the force of years of pent-up fury and frustration, and summarily ended his business partnership with Jason Graham.

AFTERWARDS, HE COULD SCARCELY CREDIT HOW RAPIDLY his mind worked. It seemed that Graham's body had hardly crumpled to the garage floor before Morton's brain shifted into high gear, assessing the situation and examining possible courses of action, almost as though his subconscious mind had already planned for just this contingency. And it may very well have done so, from the moment, little more than a week ago, when Jason had announced his sudden decision to take a lengthy vacation, and his refusal to let even his secretary know his destination. Now, a search of his breast pocket turned up an airline ticket to London, and an itinerary that included a leisurely trip through France via that country's canals. It meant there'd be nearly a month's grace before anyone moved to check on Jason's whereabouts. A month!

Feeling himself in the grip of an unexpectedly icy calm, Morton pondered his next moves. If there was one thing he had learned in his reading of mystery novels and true detective magazines it was *keep it simple*. This was no convoluted Agatha Christie plot; no fictional

detective would be on his trail, nor would any real-life investigator, provided he kept his head. That was one reason he rejected his initial impulse to call Nora and enlist her aid, for, though he knew her own hatred of Jason had grown over years of catering to her husband's iron-clad whims, he felt she would surely give way to conscience — or the unexpected. No, better to handle it all himself.

Proud of his own cool-headedness, Morton did what had to be done even as his mind raced to complete his plans. There was hardly any blood, and fortunately Jason had chosen to fall on a strip of asphalt tiling rather than the concrete floor, so the clean-up was easy. Morton removed all the identifying tags and papers from the body, cut as much as possible into tiny snippets and flushed them down the toilet. Then he retrieved the luggage from Jason's car — meanwhile blessing the lack of near neighbors who might be peering from windows — and repeated the service with its contents. All the while, he had been reviewing ways to dispose of Graham's body and automobile and — just as everything else seemed to have fallen into place so fortuitously — his experience with the Civic Improvement Council suggested an ideal solution. A few months before, as part of his duties with the Council, he had inspected an isolated area called Parkinson's Quarry that someone — possibly a tax-weary Parkinson descendant — had proposed for acquisition as a county park. An ugly, miasmic area, rife with tangled undergrowth and dominated by a deep abandoned quarry filled with dank green water, it was so difficult of access and so potentially dangerous as to hold no promise as a recreational area. But it seemed designed specifically for the concealment of corpses.

With Jason's body stowed in the trunk, Morton set out. The clothing and luggage went into a bin, located in a nearly-deserted shopping center, of a charity specializing in renovating second-hand merchandise. With a sliver of moon providing enough light, he was able to negotiate the overgrown access road to the quarry. A few yards from its edge he stopped, put the car in low gear, released the emergency brake, and watched the car move forward — slowly at first, then gathering speed until it disappeared over the edge with a great splash. Afterwards there remained only a dwindling trail of bubbles — and a five-mile hike back home.

The memory of that journey, during which he had reviewed the evening's events over and over and found no way he could be connected with Jason Graham's disappearance, reminded Aubrey Morton that he was still wearied from it. He closed his eyes for a few mo-

ments

THE SHRILL SOUND OF THE DOORBELL BROUGHT HIM AWAKE with a violent start that splashed half the contents of his highball onto his armchair. Momentarily his stomach knotted, and a chill seemed to travel all the way down his spinal column. Silently he cursed himself for having allowed himself to let down his guard, but immediately reassured himself that all was well; only the wildest of chances could trip him up now.

The doorbell rang again. Aubrey Morton got up, his mind still somewhat fuzzy after his inadvertent doze, and in that moment he felt a surge of panic. *The airline ticket!* he thought. *Did I destroy the airline ticket? And the suitcase — did I remember to take off the luggage tag?*

He opened the door.

A dapper little man stood there. A man with a high intelligent forehead and penetrating eye, glossy from his patent leather shoes to his luxuriant, waxed moustache and black pomaded hair.

"May I have a word with you, Monsieur?" he said, gravely.

And Aubrey Morton's world reeled as, staring beyond his caller, he saw the Elm Grove squad car parked at the curb, with a policeman standing beside it

"HE REALLY FELL APART," SAID OFFICER WHELAN TO CAPTAIN FISK later. "Started screaming about having committed a murder, and gave us the whole story about killing Graham and dumping the body in the quarry."

Captain Fisk turned to the dapper little man with the big moustache. "Ever see this Aubrey Morton before?"

The little man shook his head. "Never. I was just going door to door signing up prospects for this course I'm selling — Learn the French Language in the Home. He opened the door, looked at me as if I was a ghost or something and started babbling. It's a good thing Officer Whelan was there."

"Yeah," said Whelan. "I was gonna check on your peddler's permit."

"I guess you're free to go, Mr. Pennypacker," said Captain Fisk.

"Thank you," said the little salesman, rising. "I wonder," he added, stroking his moustache meditatively, "who he thought I was, anyway?"



SHERLOCK HOLMES QUIZ

Complete the following Sherlock Holmes story titles by inserting the correct word in the blank.



1. The _____ Coronet	9. A Scandal in _____
2. The Five _____ Pips	10. The _____ League
3. His _____ Bow	11. The Sussex _____
4. The _____ Ritual	12. The _____ Carbuncle
5. A Study in _____	13. The Bruce-Partington _____
6. The Valley Of _____	14. The Sign Of _____
7. The _____ Band	15. The Dancing _____
8. The Man With The Twisted _____	16. The Hound Of The _____
	17. The _____ School
	18. The _____ Problem
	19. The Dying _____
	20. A Case Of _____

ANSWERS

1. Berry	2. Orange
2. Scarlet	3. Last
3. Musgrave	4. Miss
4. Lip	5. Specckled
5. Bohemia	6. Fear
6. Men	7. Red-headed
7. Plans	8. Empire
8. Vampire	9. Final
9. Baskevilles	10. Priority
10. Men	11. Four
11. Plans	12. Blue
12. Final	13. Men
13. Priority	14. Four
14. Men	15. Men
15. Final	16. Baskevilles
16. Men	17. Priority
17. Detective	18. Final
18. Identity	19. Detective
19. Final	20. Identity

His father lay dying in bed, a victim of gang war. Phil was a good boy, who would do anything his father wanted — even, or especially, murdering those responsible!

Line of Succession

by EDWARD D. HOCH

PHILIP BELLO TOOK OUT HIS KEY RING AND CAREFULLY unlocked the bottom drawer of his desk in one corner of the bedroom. He removed the polished leather holster and shoulder harness from their resting place and laid them carefully on the satin bedspread. The revolver, a snub-nosed .38-caliber Smith & Wesson, freshly oiled after its last use, went beside them. Then he took off his suitcoat and slipped the leather harness over his shoulder.

Angie Bello, still as beautiful as when he'd married her fifteen years ago, came out of the bathroom while he was adjusting the strap. "Do you have to wear that every time you go to see your father?" she asked. She lifted the gun from the bedspread and checked for traces of oil.

"He expects it," Philip said. "What difference does it make?"

"I don't want Ronnie to see you wearing that thing."

"He's playing with the kid next door," Philip answered reasonably. "He won't see me."

She watched him pick up the snub-nosed revolver and slip it into the shoulder holster. "How long does this have to go on, Phil?"

"He's an old man, Angie. He doesn't have much longer to live." He felt he was replaying the recording of an old argument. "He was active all his life, and now he has nothing but that bed and those four walls."

"Be careful, Phil," she said as he went down the stairs.

IN THE YARD HE STOPPED TO WATCH RONNIE AND HIS FRIEND climbing a small apple tree. He waved as he got into the car, then backed out the driveway and headed across town. His father had always lived in what they liked to call the family compound, a string of three big old houses on the city's north side. Driving there now, through the familiar neighborhood traffic, Philip could remember growing up on these streets, going to the Catholic school on Crawford Avenue with all the other kids, shooting pool at Sammy's and taking dates to the Saturday night dances at the social club. It was his neighborhood for the first eighteen years of life, but when he'd finally left it to go off to college he'd promised himself he'd never look back.

The old family ties couldn't be shaken off that easily, though. Even after graduation he remained the family's eldest son. When two hired goons from Detroit gunned down his father one April afternoon last year, Philip was the one his mother called upon. It was a summons he couldn't refuse.

So now he came here at least once a week, sometimes more often, to visit the old man in the bed, to appease his mother's pleadings and his own half-formed feelings of guilt.

He came, and did the things his father wanted him to do. He wore the gun in the shoulder holster because old Angelo Bello wanted that. He talked of the old days and planned for the future, and sometimes his father asked him to do other things as well.

LIGHTS WERE ON IN THE FAMILY COMPOUND AS HE DROVE up, and he saw Johnny Faze motioning him into a parking space. Johnny had stayed on the payroll after the shooting, even though there were some who felt it was partly his fault. Philip knew better. He knew Johnny hadn't sold out to the other side. Johnny was just getting old and tired, like so many of them, and he'd looked the other way rather than take a bullet in the gut.

"How are you, Phil? Good to see you."

"How's the wife, Johnny?"

"We're gettin' by."

"How's my father?"

"The same." He was always the same these days. No better, no worse. Only the same.

"Is my mother up there with him?"

"No, she's in the parlor."

"I'll say hello to her first."

He entered the big old house, the center one in the compound, through the side door. The stairs still creaked as they had when he was a child, and he heard his mother call out, "Is that you, Philip?"

"Yes, Mama."

He went into the dimly lit parlor and kissed her lightly on the cheek. "How's father tonight?"

"He has been asking for you. He has new ideas, things to be done."

Philip nodded. "As always."

"There is nothing he can do but think. His body is useless now."

He followed her upstairs to the familiar room. Once it had been their bedroom. Now it was only the sickroom of a dying old man. The bullets meant to kill him had paralyzed him instead, and the death that should have come in seconds was frozen in time like the final scene of a long motion picture.

"My son," he said as Philip entered the dimly lit room. A single lamp burned by the bedside, and the flames of a half-dozen vigil lights flickered before a holy painting across the room.

"Hello, Father. You look good tonight."

"Do not lie to me. I know how I look." He turned the old head slightly and told his wife, "Leave us alone, Maria."

When she was gone, Philip sat down on the chair by the bed. He took the revolver from its shoulder holster and laid it where his father could see it. "I killed Tommy Sudare for you, just as you wanted."

"Sudare?"

"The last of the men who shot you. They're all dead now."

"His body —?"

"At the bottom of Lake Michigan."

The old man sighed. "Tell me about it."

"I caught him coming out of an all-night poker game on Grand Street. It was funny — he didn't know me at first. He thought it was a robbery and he was trying to tell me he'd lost all his money at cards. Then, just before I shot him, I told him who I was. I told him it was for you."

His father smiled. "Where did you hit him?"

"Between the eyes, like you taught me. Johnny helped me get rid of the body."

"Johnny is a good man. When I am gone and you are in command, see that he is taken care of in his old age."

"Of course."

The old man's eyes went to the gun on the bed. "Now I have another job for you. Tommy Sudare and the others were hired by Milt Kaufmann. You must get him too. Then no one will stand in the way of your leadership when I am gone."

"Kaufmann. That will be difficult."

"You can do it tonight. On Tuesdays he always went to the athletic club. He probably still does. You can get him as he leaves. He never has more than one bodyguard with him."

"We don't want to start a new war, Father. It would be best if he just disappeared. That way they might suspect but they will never know for sure."

His father's head managed a nod. "Do it however you think best. Let me know how it goes."

"Of course. I'll phone you in the morning."

"Telephones can be tapped. Come here tomorrow night."

"All right," he agreed, rising from the chair. He retrieved the gun and slid it back into the leather holster as his mother returned.

"Did you have a nice visit?" she asked, meeting her son's eyes.

"Very nice."

She approached the bed. "Angeo . . ."

"Not now, Maria. I want to rest." His eyes closed, shutting her out.

Maria Bello followed her son from the bedroom. "He sleeps much of the time now," she said. "He will not be with us long."

"You should have a night nurse to care for him."

"I have cared for him all my life. I can do it a little while longer."

"Goodbye, Mama," Philip said, and bent to kiss her cheek.

"When will you come again?"

"He wants to see me tomorrow."

"Another job?"

"Yes."

"Be careful, Philip."

He left by the side door and returned to his car. Johnny Faze was waiting nearby and Philip told him what his father wanted. "Kaufmann," Johnny repeated softly. "Will it be like the last time?"

"Exactly like the last time, Johnny. He'll disappear, and his body will go into Lake Michigan. There'll be nothing in the papers."

"When?"

"Tonight. I'll be back tomorrow to report on it."

Johnny nodded and patted his shoulder. There was nothing more to be said.

PHILIP DROVE BACK DOWNTOWN, BEING CAREFUL TO KEEP within the speed limit. Though he had a permit for the pistol, he didn't want to be stopped tonight. He drove through the Nighttown section and reached the athletic club a little after nine o'clock. From a parking space across the street he had a good view of the main entrance.

He had no way of knowing whether Milt Kaufmann was inside on this particular Tuesday night, and after waiting twenty minutes he'd just about decided he wasn't. But then a familiar figure appeared in the doorway, sauntering slowly across the sidewalk. It was a former boxer named Rollo, whom Philip knew as one of Milt Kaufmann's bodyguards.

He waited a bit longer, watching Rollo stroll to the parking lot halfway down the block. Then the door of the athletic club opened again and Kaufmann himself appeared. He was a tall man who moved lightly on his feet. He'd been a football player in college and always took good care of his body. Philip watched him through the windshield -- watched and felt the weight of the revolver beneath his arm.

Kaufmann waited at the curb and almost at once Rollo drove up with the car. Philip continued watching until the car started up again and rounded the next corner.

He followed along behind them for a few blocks, then took a right turn and headed home.

ANGIE WAS WATCHING TELEVISION WHEN HE ARRIVED HOME

a little after ten. She turned to stare at him but said nothing. "Where's Ronnie?" he asked.

"I just sent him up to bed," she answered, rising to turn down the sound on the television set. "How was your father?"

"The same. Mama says he sleeps a lot."

"Did you talk to him? Does he still want you to take over for him after he dies?"

"Oh, yes. There was never any doubt about that. I'm next in the line of succession."

"What else did he want?"

Philip knew what she was asking. He slipped out of his coat and unstrapped the shoulder holster, dropping it onto an empty chair. "The usual thing. He asked me to kill someone else for him — Milt Kaufmann."

"What did you say?"

"That I'd do it. Tonight."

"Phil —"

"Don't worry, it's just like the others. I'll go back tomorrow and tell him I did it. I'll tell him Johnny helped me dump the body in the lake."

"Why do you play this game with him?"

"He's a dying man, Angie. I want him to die happy, thinking he's still in control, still has the power to cause other men's deaths. Mama and Johnny know what I'm doing. They go along with it, for his sake."

"So you carry that gun and tell him those lies."

Philip turned to stare out the window, though it was dark and he could see nothing. "I drove over to Nighthtown before I came home. I saw Milt Kaufmann standing alone on the curb. I could have taken out my gun and shot him, Angie."

She didn't say anything for a long time, but only sat and stared at her husband. Presently they heard a noise upstairs and Philip reached over to hide the gun. "It's only Ronnie going for a glass of water," she told him.

He relaxed and said, "It'll be over soon. My father can't live much longer."

"Then what happens, Phil? What happens to the line of succession?"

"I don't know," he admitted. He turned to stare out the window again, as if he might find the answer in the darkness. ●

It wasn't a bad life for her, but it was going to get better — when a certain person died!

The Perfect World of Leota Skaggs

by VERONICA ZICH

SHE HELD HER HEAD HIGH, SO THE CROWN WOULDN'T SLIP ... the gold crown, encrusted with diamonds and rubies. The gleam of the jewels shone in the faces of passersby, and they shaded their eyes to protect themselves from the brilliant glare.

She smiled her secret smile, for she alone knew of the existence of the crown, and of the golden sceptre, which she carried in her hand.

They think it's the sun shining in their eyes, she told herself. That's because they don't recognize me. But then, why should they? After all, nobody would expect to see the queen of England walking down the streets of south-side Chicago.

She heard the sound of footsteps behind her. My footmen, she thought, keeping a respectful distance.

“You dummy, Leota Skaggs!”

The cruel voice startled her. Her shoulders slumped, and a look of terror replaced the regal smile. She turned to face, not her footman, but Johnny. Johnny Skaggs.

“You ain’t just a dummy!” he muttered. “You’re nuts! You know that? Struttin’ down the street with that dumb stick in your hand. Everybody’s laughin’ and pointin’ at you. Look at ‘em. Ya dummy! Give it here!”

He wrenched it from her hand. She cowered, and covered her face with both arms, as she waited for the blows to fall.

“Hey, cut that out! Stand up straight! I’m not gonna hit ya. Not here. But I ought to! How ya think I feel when everybody sees my woman acting like a fool? Get home. Get home where you belong! And stay there! Get!”

She turned, and ran swiftly down the snowy street, sliding on the slippery surface as she flew. But she maintained her balance. She had to. She had to get away from Johnny Skaggs.

She could hear the laughter from the group of teenagers, who clustered in the doorway of the boarded-up warehouse, stomping their feet and clapping their hands against their arms for warmth.

“Run, dummy!” they called.

“He’s gonna getcha! Run!”

“Look at ‘er go!”

“Hey, dummy, you oughta try out for the Olympics. With Johnny Skaggs chasin’ ya, I’ll bet you could win a gold medal!”

THEIR LAUGHTER RANG IN HER EARS, EVEN AS SHE CLOSED the door behind her, and stood, panting, against its protecting frame.

In sudden panic, she turned to look through the broken glass, to see if he had followed her. He was nowhere in sight. She sighed in relief.

But he’s back, she thought, as the tenseness returned. He’s back in Chicago.

“I don’t want you pretendin’ no more!” he had warned her, the last time he was home. “I can tell when you’re makin’ believe. Pretendin’ you’re better’n me. It makes me mad! And when I get mad, you know what happens. Don’t you get me mad, Leota Skaggs. You hear?”

Yes. She heard. And she understood. She knew the depths of his temper. Each time he flew into a rage, the violence with which he vented his anger upon her; was worse than the previous episode.

“Leota,” the social worker had said, “you *must* file charges against

him. It's the only way we can help you. Please, Leota!"

Mrs. Harris meant well. She was a kind woman. Leota could see how desperately she wanted to help, that day she came to the hospital to plead for Johnny's arrest.

But Mrs. Harris couldn't possibly understand a man like Johnny Skaggs. If Leota had filed charges, his friends would furnish bail money, and then he'd come looking for her. He'd find her, too, if it took the rest of his life.

And he'd make her pay.

Mrs. Harris lived in a different world. She had a husband who loved her, like in the romantic story books Leota read sometimes at the library. That love shone in the eyes of Stephen Harris every time he looked at his wife. Leota had watched them closely when she stayed at their home . . . stayed until Johnny left town, and it was safe to go back again.

Mrs. Harris. It would be nice to be Mrs. Harris. She reached up, and touched her short brown hair. It wasn't brown any more. It was blond. And it hung loosely, in soft waves, over her shoulders.

She swung her head from side to side, and felt the golden tresses brush against her cheek. So soft. So clean, and shining, and soft.

She leaned against the door frame, and smiled up into the face of Stephen Harris. She saw those shining eyes, as he bent to press his lips, gently, tenderly, to hers.

Safe and secure in his arms, she closed her eyes, and felt her body relax.

"Hey, Leota, what you doin' down there?"

HER EYES POPPED OPEN. SHE LOOKED UP, NOT AT STEPHEN Harris, but at the form of her friend, Dessie Green.

"Come on up, Leota. I been waitin' fer ya."

Leota started up the stairs.

"Guess what, Leota? Old Weaver give me the left-over chili, cause he's closin' the diner fer a week. He has to go to the hospital. The chili ain't bad. Come and eat with me."

They entered the room together, and Dessie chained and bolted the door behind them.

"Looky here, Leota. That chili filled a whole bucket! And I snitched all them oyster crackers to go with it. Help yourself."

She didn't need a second invitation. It wasn't often she was invited to such a feast.

They scooped it out with a tin cup, and piled it high on the two plates. Then they covered each portion with oyster crackers, and dug in.

"Um-m-m! Ain't it good, Leota?"

She nodded, and continued eating.

"Ol' Weaver gets mean sometimes when he's drinkin', but he sure kin make good chili."

Leota rubbed her stomach, and rolled her eyes, in agreement.

They ate their fill, and still could not see the bottom of the bucket. There would be enough for a feast tomorrow, too.

They sat on the broken couch as they ate. At one end, two of its spindly, wooden legs had collapsed long ago, under the weight of the bounteous Dessie. Afraid of being held responsible for totally destroying the moth-eaten piece of furniture, she sat only on the broken end of the couch. Leota perched on the other end, her ninety pounds lifted high in the air by Dessie's bulk. They appeared to be sitting on a teeter-totter.

"Leota," Dessie said, "you ever see any of the money Johnny gets?"

She shook her head, but a look of fear crossed her face.

"Now, Leota," Dessie said, reaching over to pat her friend's hand, "you know I ain't gonna do nothin' that'll get you in trouble. I got trouble enough of my own."

Leota smiled, and nodded.

It was true. They were two of a kind. Leota, the dummy, and Dessie, the retarded, overweight, ox of a woman, with the gentleness and gullibility of a child.

Fellow sufferers. Outcasts of a society which cared little for the flawed, and the handicapped.

"I see people givin' Johnny money all the time," Dessie said. "What's he do with it all?"

Leota shrugged, hoping to bring an end to the subject. She didn't have long to wait. Dessie's chatter was always jumpy.

"Hey, Leota, I seen a pretty picture today. Weaver showed it to me. On the new calendar he got for next year. He said it's Hawaii. Boy, it's nice! And Weaver said it's always summer there. You don't have to worry if you ain't got no winter coat or nothin'. Wouldn't that be nice? You know about Hawaii, Leota?"

She nodded.

"Did you read about it, in all them books you got from the liberry?"

She nodded again.

"Boy, I wish I could read like you do. But it just don't make no sense to me. Learnin' all them words. Anyway, I was wishin' you and me could go to Hawaii. Wouldn't that be fun, Leota?"

"Leota's eyes sparkled, as she nodded, enthusiastically.

"If we could get some of Johnny's money, maybe we could go. Do you think we could?"

Leota shook her head. She crossed her index fingers, and formed an "X". It was the sign she used for Johnny's name.

"Johnny? What about Johnny? What? Oh, Leota, is he back?"

She nodded, sadly.

"You kin hide here, Leota. I won't let 'im getcha."

She shook her head. No. She wouldn't involve Dessie in her troubles. She wouldn't let Johnny hurt Dessie. And he would. Oh, yes, he would, to get at Leota . . . no matter how hard her friend tried to protect her.

Dessie's hulking frame was no match for Johnny's gun. Leota wished there was some way to make her friend understand how important it was to steer clear of Johnny, now that he owned a gun.

THAT LAST TIME HE WAS HOME, HE BRAGGED ABOUT IT, even pointed it in her face, and held it up to her temple.

"I got me a rod now. Like all them big shots. And I used it, Leota. You know that? There's a guy in St. Louis tried to take somethin' that was mine. But nobody takes what belongs to me. And he ain't never gonna take nothin' from nobody no more. I'm a real good shot. You 'member how I used to get me more rabbits down home than anybody else? Johnny Skaggs don't miss what he aims for. Don't you forget that! You hear me?"

She caught sight of the gun again today, when he pulled the stick from her hands, and his coat opened wide. Stuck inside his belt, it was in easy reach.

She wondered if she would be his next victim. So often, she had come close to death at his hands. The last time, she was sure she would never recover. But she came through it, good as new. Just as her mother had recovered each time Pa had beaten her. "Women is strong, Leota," she used to say. "Sometimes, I whisht we wasn't."

But now he had a gun, and strength no longer mattered.

It wasn't as if she could prevent him from losing his temper. The slightest thing could set him off. She had no control over his moods.

Even as a young child, she'd heard stories about him.

"That Johnny Skaggs is crazy!" people used to say. "You know what he did? He walked past the Higham place, and their dog barked at him. It made him so mad that he went home and got his shotgun, and he killed that dog, and every chicken on the place. He's crazy, I tell ya. He oughta be locked up."

They locked him up. But not for long. He always found a way to get back out again.

"Ain't no jail built kin hold Johnny Skaggs!" he boasted. "Ain't nobody gonna cage me up fer long. You hear me, Leota Skaggs?"

She heard, and she believed him, too. But if he beat her for no reason at all, what would he do if he knew she had discovered his secret hiding place? He'd kill her. He'd kill her, for sure.

"I got me a key," he bragged one day. "Every cop in town would like to find that key!" He laughed when he said it. "Ain't nobody's gonna find it," he said. "Cause I got me a hidin' place nobody knows about. Nobody."

HE THOUGHT SHE WAS ASLEEP THAT MORNING WHEN HE climbed on top of the dresser, but through half-slitted eyes, she watched him put something deep inside that rotted place, on the top of the window frame.

She waited until she was sure he had gone, then set a chair on the dresser, climbed up, and removed the tiny envelope from its hiding place.

How brave she felt when she fitted the key it held into the lock at the baggage section of the railroad station . . . fitted it just the way she had seen him do it, the day she cowered behind a post, watching him, unseen.

There was a small suitcase inside the locker, but there was no need to open it. She knew what it held. Johnny had bragged often of the money he had hidden away.

"Ain't nobody gettin' none of that money but me. I ain't tellin' you nor nobody else where I put that key. But I got me so much money that someday I'll just take off for one of them foreign places. And I'll live like a king down there. That's the way them big shots do it. I'll have me so many women, nobody kin count 'em all. And the police can't touch you down there."

Leota closed the locker door securely, and left the station, to return the key to its hiding place.

But something had happened that day. A new fantasy began. One far better than any she'd lived before. . . .

She went to the sink, to clean the dishes for Dessie.

"You gonna stay here with me, Leota?" Dessie asked.

She shook her head, and pointed to the door.

"Oh, why you wanna go home for? Ol' Johnny's gonna find you."

She patted Dessie's arm, reassuringly, to calm her, and smiled at the worried face of her friend.

As she walked out the door, she waved.

"Bye, Leota, honey. Be careful!" Dessie warned.

SHE HAD BEEN SITTING ON THE DILAPIDATED SOFA, STARING up at the window frame, for hours. She thought of the key, lying in the secret vault, which only she and Johnny knew about. As she stared at the hiding place, she relived her favorite fantasy.

In her imagination, she climbed on the chair once more, removed the key, and walked to the railroad station. She knew each building along the way, for she had walked this route many times, since her discovery.

Without a moment's hesitation, she opened the locker, and withdrew the case. Walking briskly, she hurried to the rest room, and went inside a stall.

She sat, and opened the case in her lap.

Stacks of money lay in neat piles before her. She removed one packet, and put it inside her bra. She lifted her sweater, and opened the flap of the gingham money belt, which she had made for herself . . . the belt which Johnny thought was a joke.

"You dummy!" he laughed. "What use you got for a money belt? That's the craziest thing you ever done. Go on. Wear it. It proves what I always say. You ain't only a dummy. You're nuts, Leota Skaggs! Just plain nuts!"

Carefully, she pushed packet after packet into the opening, until her entire waist was encircled with the money. She liked the feel of it. She put one packet in each of the pockets of her jacket, closed the case, and left the rest room.

She walked up to the ticket window, and handed the man her note.

"One way to San Francisco," he read, aloud. "Here you are, ma'am. Have a nice trip."

The train stood waiting, as she walked through the opened gateway. A porter helped her aboard. Everyone she passed, smiled and greeted

her.

In her fantasies, people were always friendly, and smiling, for they understood that she was the same as they. No one ever called her "dummy," and her muteness was never a handicap at all. For this was a perfect world. A world that was truly a paradise.

Paradise!

SHE SAT UPRIGHT. WHAT MADE HER THINK OF THAT WORD?
Of course. It was Dessie. Dessie, and the picture she'd seen of Hawaii. Leota had just finished reading a book at the library, all about Hawaii. It was called PARADISE, and it was filled with beautiful color pictures of the island. She had wanted to bring the book home, to take her time reading it again; but she hadn't finished all the books she had hidden at Dessie's. She'd read those first, and then get the book about Hawaii.

Johnny wouldn't allow her to bring books home from the library. He wouldn't let her go near the library, but she spent most of her time there, when he was gone.

"You ain't gonna waste no time readin'. You hear me? Books just give you dumb ideas that you got some brains, and you ain't! You're just a dummy! You got that? Just a dummy!"

She nodded, but she knew it wasn't true. She thought back to the day her teacher, Mary Evans, had tried to explain that to her father.

"She's a bright child, Mr. Jackson. Just because she can't speak doesn't mean she's not intelligent. I just wish I knew how to teach her properly. I don't have the kind of training to do a good job, and there aren't any schools down here for her kind of problem. If you would just consider letting me send her to a school I heard about in Boston, I know she could go far. She's an "A" student, Mr. Jackson. She's a smart girl."

Pa had laughed at Mrs. Evans, and told her to get out. Shortly after that, while her mother stood helplessly watching, he had dragged Leota off, and given her to Johnny Skaggs.

That was the end of her schooling, but she hadn't stopped reading. Nobody could take that away from her. And she learned to live in two worlds . . . an ugly place, with uncaring, cruel people, and a perfect world of fantasy. A paradise.

That world existed only in her imagination . . . at least, so she thought.

Now, for the first time, she realized that there might be such a

paradise . . . here . . . in the real world . . . as well as in the world of fantasy.

And that's where she would go!

She would bide her time. She would bear his abuse, until he left again. Then she would make that fantasy come true.

This time, her dream would not end in San Francisco, as it had in the past. She would go all the way to that Island Paradise she'd grown to love.

But she wouldn't live that dream by herself. She would take Dessie along on that journey.

She jumped to her feet, excited, breathing hard. Dessie. She had to tell Dessie. But how?

Dessie could make sense of small sentences . . . if she only saw one sentence at a time. Leota would print it, bit by bit, until she felt sure that Dessie understood the dream they would share.

A SUDDEN BANGING OF THE DOWNSTAIRS DOOR, THE SOUND of footsteps running up the stairs, and the pounding on her door, brought her swiftly back to the world in which she lived.

"Police! Open up!"

Frightened, she hurried to the door, and unhooked the chain. Pushing her aside, two men in uniform entered the room, and, with guns drawn, searched the premises.

"Where is he? Where's Johnny Skaggs?"

She shrugged her shoulders, and shook her head.

"Come on, lady! Out with it! Where is he?"

A crowd had gathered in the hallway and on the stairs.

"She's a dummy," a woman called. "She can't talk."

"Oh, that's right," the other officer said. "I remember her. We've been called here before."

"Okay, but we'll be back!" the first officer warned. "He can't squirm out of this one. It's murder, and there are witnesses."

THE CHAIR TEETERED, BUT SHE CAUGHT HOLD OF THE window frame to steady herself. She pinned the key to her bra, then went to Dessie's room.

"Will they get Johnny, Leota?" Dessie asked.

She nodded.

"Do you think he'll come back here?"

She shook her head, and put her finger to her lips.

They sat quietly, listening for sounds in the hallway. As time dragged on, Leota slid down the couch beside Dessie, to rest her friend's head on her shoulder. Dessie fell asleep.

A sudden slamming of the downstairs door brought them both to their feet. Frightened, they listened to the heavy footfalls on the stairs.

"Let's try his room again," a voice said. "It's got to be hidden someplace in there."

They relaxed once more, grateful that it was the police, and not Johnny who had returned.

Leota ignored the pounding on the door to her room. They could break it open easily enough, when they realized she wasn't there. Johnny had done it many times, when he came home in a rage, too impatient to wait for Leota to unfasten the chain.

They were inside the room now. She could hear them, throwing things about, pulling out drawers. It didn't matter what they did to the room. She wouldn't be going back there again.

They must have finished their search. She heard them come back into the hallway.

"What happened to his wife? Anybody know?" a man's voice called.

"She's probably with the retard next door," a woman said.

Leota answered the knock at Dessie's door. She recognized the officer as one who had accompanied her to the hospital in the past.

"It's all over, ma'am," he told her, in a kindly voice. "He can't hurt you any more. He put up quite a fight. Shot one officer. Almost got a second, before we gunned him down. You'll have to come down to the morgue to identify him. Then you can go."

LEOTA GLANCED AT DESSIE, WHO SLEPT, PEACEFULLY, IN the seat beside her.

The stewardess came down the aisle.

"Fasten your seat belt please," she said, smiling. "We'll be landing soon."

Leota nudged Dessie gently, then reached over to help secure her belt.

"Are we comin' to Hawaii now?" Dessie asked.

She nodded.

"Leota, honey," Dessie said, putting her hand on the arm of her friend, "I guess I'm just not smart enough to figure out how this all happened, but I never thought I'd be flyin' in the sky. And eatin' all that good food. And drinkin' all them sodies the lady brought us. I

kin hardly believe it."

Leota grinned, and nodded.

"You know what I think, Leota, honey?" Dessie took Leota's hand in hers. "I think that when we get to Hawaii, it'll be like in the movies, you know? I mean, we'll always be happy. And nothin' will ever hurt us again. And you know why?"

Leota shook her head.

"Cause me and you's gonna be in paradise!"

Tears shone in Leota's eyes, as she nodded.

The voice of the pilot came over the loudspeaker:

"Ladies and gentlemen," he said, "if you will look out of your window, you will see that we are coming to Pearl Harbor, where you will notice some of our fleet is docked at the moment."

"May I be the first to say 'aloha' to all of you, on this most beautiful sixth day of December, nineteen hundred and forty-one." ●

VERONICA ZEEH: *The Perfect World of Leota Skaggs*

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It was almost a hundred years ago (1887 to be exact) when *A Study in Scarlet* introduced Sherlock Holmes to the world. Since that time the story has been reprinted uncounted times, but now we have something entirely new — a splendidly put together Murder Dossier based on Dr. Watson's immortal tale (with an assist from his friend and literary agent, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle). The dossier contains reproductions of the actual clues of the case — photographs, samples of Dr. Watson's celebrated handwriting, Mr. Holmes' calling card, police reports, and reproductions of the newspaper accounts of the time. Enough idle talk, be advised that editor Simon Goodenough has lived up to his name and more. It's all yours for \$17.95 from Quill, and what a buy it is. William Morrow and Co. has it. Quick, Watson, the bookstore!

☆ ☆ ☆

Henry Decker's splendid courtroom drama, *Outrage*, is now available in paperback from Avon at \$3.50. If you haven't read it, don't miss it!

☆ ☆ ☆

An exceptional use of good background is made by Richard Grindal in his new book *Death Stalk*. The scene is the Scottish Hebrides, and most of the people in the book are the residents of these forlorn islands. There is a lot about the making of Scotch whiskey as the book unfolds and a murder investigation moves forward. A fine, gripping story, but purists are not going to like the ending, which breaks some of the cardinal rules of mystery writing. Otherwise very much recommended. (St. Martin's, \$10.95)

☆ ☆ ☆

The Popular Press continues to put out scholarly works on crime and mystery writing. The latest is *Murder She Wrote*, a study of Agatha Christie's detective fiction by Patricia D. Maida and Nicholas B. Spornick. The authors have combined their little grey cells to produce a very well done report on Dame Agatha's opera and one that every serious collector and student will want to own. (Popular Culture Press, Bowling Green, Ohio 43403)

☆ ☆ ☆

Max Collins makes his hard cover debut in *The Baby Blue Rip-Off*, the story of an ex-cop who gets involved in delivering hot dinners to elderly shut-ins and finds himself encountering robbery and murder. This is a lightweight tale, written for entertainment about a somewhat smart-alec protagonist. If you don't know Max Collins by name, you have probably been reading him for years anyway: he does the plotting for the Dick Tracy comic strip. (Walker and Co., \$11.95)

☆ ☆ ☆

Robert Traver's memorable classic, *Anatomy of a Murder* is available once more, this time in a good quality paperback edition. At this late date it is hardly necessary to point out the author's distinguished career as a supreme court justice in the state of Michigan, or that the film made from this book is already a classic. (St. Martin's, \$7.95)

☆ ☆ ☆

Frederick Davies' *Death of a Hit Man* is billed as "A spy thriller in the best English tradition." It isn't quite that: it's largely the investigation of a murder at Cambridge University. The title tips the ending, but it's one that every reader will anticipate anyway. One note: the author's attempt at American dialogue is atrocious. (St. Martin's, \$10.95)

☆ ☆ ☆

A new mystery novelist, Magdalen Nabb, has made an impressive debut with *Death of an Englishman*. She is the winner of the British Crime Writers' Association best first crime novel award, and no wonder. Behind the rather bland title is a totally captivating story of murder in Florence with a cast of engaging people who almost leap off the pages. There are several recent books about Florence and its art world, but this one makes the city almost a living reality in your own living room as you follow a young policeman who is watching all of the events around him and participating in some. Don't miss this one; it's great. (Scribners, \$10.95)

☆ ☆ ☆

When notable private eye writers are discussed, the name of Michael Collins is not mentioned as often as he deserves. His one-armed investigator, Dan Fortune, makes his eleventh book appearance in *Freak*, in which he is retained to find the son of a wealthy man who thoroughly disapproves of his son's choice of a bride. Dan goes to work to find the missing couple and, as is to be expected, encounters compounding complications along the way. Praise God for small favors, there is no threadbare conflict between the private eye and a cop, but a carefully crafted story with a well worked out and unexpected solution. (Dodd Mead, \$10.95)

☆ ☆ ☆

Gerald Hammond's *The Game* is all about murder in a very high class and expensive country club brothel. The investigator is gunsmith Keith Calder, who has appeared previously in the same role. The most engaging person in the book is the very attractive and extremely hard-headed madam who runs the place like the business that it is. The solution may not please some official authorities, but the reader is likely to find it entirely suitable. A good read for late at night, particularly if you don't have something better to do. (St. Martin's, \$10.95)

☆ ☆ ☆

The latest anthology under Alfred Hitchcock's name is *Death Reach* edited by Cathleen Jordan. There are 27 short stories by some well-known names. Dan Fortune is with us here too, as well as a number of other notable sleuths. (The Dial Press, \$12.95)

☆ ☆ ☆

Grand Master Julian Symons' latest study of crime is called *The Detling Secret*. It has a Victorian setting which climaxes in a country house that would drive most contemporary individuals out of their minds. There are interfamily hostilities, Irish rebels who would win little sympathy today, and a secret that would be without meaning now. However, in Victorian times, it was another matter. (Viking, \$14.95)

☆ ☆ ☆

Every Sherlockian's heart will beat faster when he gets hold of a copy of *Sherlock Holmes, a Study in Sources* by Donald A. Redmond. Much splendid scholarship has gone into studies of the Holmes canon, but this volume is staggering. With tireless attention to detail the author has investigated the origins of names in the canon, of places, and of people with the result that he has supplied some startling identifications that are likely to stand indefinitely as definitive. There

are hours and hours of pure joy in this learned volume for the faithful followers of the World's Greatest Detective. This book is a remarkable achievement that deserves to be classified with the Master's own monograph on the Polyphonic Motets of Lassus: "and is said by experts to be the last word upon the subject." McGill-Queens University Press. Get your copy from the Marketing Division, 63A St., George St. Toronto, Ontario, Canada MSS 1A6 (\$24.95)

☆ ☆ ☆

Five Rivers to Death marks the second appearance of Prem Narayan, an Indian detective whose first recorded adventure we regrettably missed. The author is Melvin A. Casberg, a distinguished physician turned novelist who displays a profound knowledge of India, particularly of the Punjab. An American surgeon of Indian descent comes to his ethnic homeland to settle the disposition of some inherited land. He runs directly into two different groups of fanatics who are determined to thwart him. There is abundant action and considerable violence before it is all over. The author's style is slightly jerky with some awkward time jumps, but the stark realism of the story and the detailed, accurate depiction of India override this consideration. (Strawberry Hill Press, 2594 15th Avenue, San Francisco 94127. \$6.95, soft cover)

☆ ☆ ☆

PAPERBACK NOTES: Walker and Company has begun a new series of British Mysteries in paperback that is of considerable interest. The first titles are: *Death in Willow Pattern* by W. J. Burley, *Zion Road* by Simon Harvester, *Step in the Dark* by Elizabeth Lemarchand, and *Yesterday's Enemy* by William Haggard. These are sound selections and we very much anticipate forthcoming new titles. All are \$2.95 . . . A very good read is *Scism* by Bill Granger. After twenty years a tortured and half dead priest comes out of the Cambodian jungle with a secret. But he won't talk, not to anyone. For espionage fans, one of the best in a long time. Pocketbooks, \$3.50 . . . In the same category you will enjoy I. B. Melchior's *The Tombstone Cipher*, available from Bantam \$3.50 . . . Samuel Fuller's praised *The Dark Page* is offered by Avon. Murder in the newspaper world is not new, but this is way above average . . . Ken Girard's *Altered Egos* is based on a ventriloquist's dummy that takes on its own personality. A nice chilling tale from Pinnacle at \$2.95.

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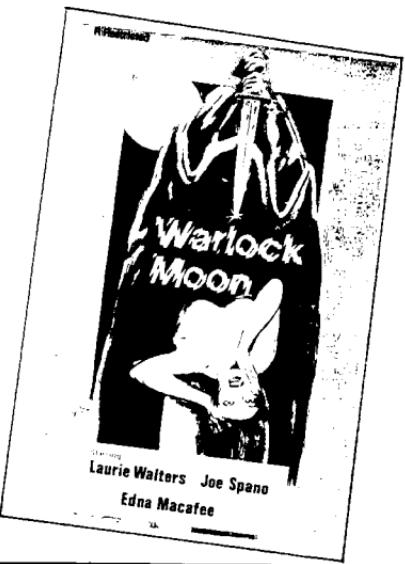
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